Imaginative Writing

about the author

Photo: Mary Stephan

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THE ELEMENTS OF CRAFT

FOURTH EDITION

JANET BURROWAY
Florida State University

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contents

Preface *xii*

CHAPTER 1 Invitation to the Writer 1

You... 1
...and writing... 2
...and reading... 3
...and this book... 4
...and your journal... 6

Journal Excerpts 8

Ayelet Waldman 8

Billy Collins 9

Cris Mazza 9

Patricia Henley 10

Philip Graham 10

A word about your workshop... 12

PART I The Elements of Craft

CHAPTER 2 Image 15

Image and Imagination 16
Concrete, Significant Details 20
Figures of Speech 24

READINGS 28

Creative Nonfiction 28

Annie Dillard
from *Heaven and Earth in Jest* 28

David Sedaris
Standing By 29

Fiction 34

Tobias Wolff
Bullet in the Brain 34

Jamaica Kincaid
Girl 38

Poems 39

Roger Bonair-Agard
American History looks for light—a prayer for the survival of Barack Obama 39

Billy Collins
Snow Day 41

Yusef Komunyakaa
Facing It 42

Drama 44

Jane Martin
French Fries 44

CHAPTER 3 Voice 47

Your Voice 48
Persona 50
Irony 52
Character Voice 53
Point of View 55

READINGS 62

Creative Nonfiction 62

Alice Walker
Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self 62

Warren J. Bowe
Guns for Teachers 68

Fiction 69

George Saunders
Victory Lap 69

Jorge Luis Borges
The Book of Sand 82

Poems 85

Alicia Ostriker
Wrong About the Horse 85

Barbara Hamby
Ode to American English 86

Adam J. Ruben
The Grad Student Rap 88

Drama 89

Chuck O'Connor
High Hard Ones 89

CHAPTER 4 Character 94

Character as Desire 95
Character as Image 97
Character as Voice 99
Character as Action 102
Character as Thought 104
Character as Presented by the Author 106
Character as Conflict 107
Stock and Flat Characters 108

READINGS 109

Creative Nonfiction 109

Aleksandar Hemon
The Book of My Life 109

Benjamin Percy
Me vs. Animals 112

Fiction 118

Richard Bausch
Tandolfo the Great 118

Poems 127

Theodore Roethke
I Knew a Woman 127

Carole Simmons Oles
Stonecarver 128

Elizabeth Jennings
One Flesh 129

Kaylin Haught
God Says Yes to Me 130

Drama 131

Molly Campbell
Telephone Bob 131

CHAPTER 5 Setting 135

Setting as the World 137
Setting as a Camera 141
Setting as Mood and Symbol 144
Setting as Action 146

READINGS 148

Creative Nonfiction 148

Joan Didion
At the Dam 148

Fiction 150

Donald Barthelme
The School 150

Angela Carter
The Werewolf 153

Poems 154

Sherman Alexie
At Navajo Monument Valley Tribal School 154

John Freeman
Beirut 155

Philip Appleman
Nobody Dies in the Spring 156

Yusef Komunyakaa
Nude Interrogation 157

Drama 158

David Ives
The Philadelphia 158

CHAPTER 6 Story 166

Story as a Journey 167
Story as a Power Struggle 168
Story as a Connection and Disconnection 171

READINGS 176

Creative Nonfiction 176

Patricia Hampl
Red Sky in the Morning 176

Fiction 179

David Foster Wallace
Incarnations of Burned Children 179

Scott Blackwood
One of Us Is Hidden Away 181

Poems 187

Robert Hass
A Story About the Body 187

Albert Goldbarth
Columbine High School/Littleton, CO 188

Maxine Kumin
Woodchucks 188

Li-Young Lee
The Hammock 189

Drama 190

Lanford Wilson
Eukiah 190

CHAPTER 7 Development and Revision 195

Developing a Draft 197
Structuring 199
Research 202
Revision 203
Editing 207
The Workshop 208

Examples 211
Elizabeth Bishop: First and Final Drafts of "One Art" 211
Patty Seyburn: "Anatomy of Disorder" 214
Janet Burroway: The Opening of *Indian Dancer*: A Revision Narrative 218

PART II The Genres

CHAPTER 8 Creative Nonfiction 225

The Essay and Creative Nonfiction 226
Memoir and the Personal Essay 227
Techniques of Creative Nonfiction 229
Fact and Truth 234

READINGS 237

Gayle Pemberton
Do He Have Your Number, Mr. Jeffrey? 237

Margaret Atwood
The Female Body 245

S. L. Wisenberg
Margot's Diary 247

Michael Chabon
Ragnarok Boy 251

Creative Nonfiction Format 255

CHAPTER 9 Fiction 259

Story and Plot 260
Scene and Summary 263
Backstory and Flashback 266
Text and Subtext 268

READINGS 270

Amy Bloom
The Story 270

Ernest Hemingway
A Very Short Story 279

Ursula K. Le Guin
The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas 280

Edith Pearlman
Self-Reliance 285

Ron Carlson
Bigfoot Stole My Wife 290

Fiction Format 294

CHAPTER 10 Poetry 297

Formal and Free Verse 298
Working with Sound 302
The Poetic Line 305
Imagery, Connotation, and Metaphor 307
Density and Intensity 310
Finding the Poem 315

READINGS 318

Gerald Stern
Columbia the Gem 318

Sylvia Plath
Stillborn 319

Steve Kowit
The Grammar Lesson 320

Tony Hoagland
There Is No Word 320

Grace Paley
Fathers 322

Erin Belieu
Love Is Not an Emergency 323

Sharon Olds
The Language of the Brag 324

Nick Laird
Epithalamium 325

Poetry Format 326

CHAPTER 11 Drama 328

The Difference Between Drama and Fiction 329
Sight: Sets, Action, Costumes, Props 331
Sound: Verbal and Nonverbal 335
Structure: Making a Scene 339
The Ten-Minute Play 340

READINGS 341

Anton Chekhov
The Proposal 341

José Rivera
Gas 353

William Dunne
Good Morning, Romeo 356

Joe DiPietro
Executive Dance 363

Drama Format 367

Appendix A: A Basic Prosody 373

Appendix B: Line Editing 383

Glossary 385

Credits 398

Index 406

preface

Imaginative writing is a fairly straightforward two-part harmony. You have to be born with the knack and acquire the skill. Many more are born with the knack than acquire the skill. The knack can be freed and developed; the skill can be studied and honed. The one wants wild flight and the other thrills to the harness. Enough of one may temporarily compensate for too little of the other, but unless both are there, the result will be a bore or a hodgepodge. This book tries to address a little of both.

In the fourth edition of *Imaginative Writing* I have tried to refine and focus several features of the book without fundamentally changing its purpose, which is to provide a workable and energizing multigenre text for basic creative writing courses.

New to the Fourth Edition

- **New selections.** Nearly half of the selections in all four genres are new to this edition, including:
  - New selections in Creative Nonfiction by Aleksandar Hemon, David Sedaris, Michael Chabon, and others.
  - New selections in Fiction from Jamaica Kincaid, Ursula Le Guin, Edith Pearlman, George Saunders, Tobias Wolff, Richard Bausch, and others.
  - New selections in Poetry by Alicia Ostriker, Erin Belieu, Kaylin Haught, John Freeman, and others.
  - New selections in Drama from Will Dunne, Joe DiPietro, Molly Campbell, and Chuck O'Connor.
- **New section in poetry chapter.** An expanded section on Poetry with more than a dozen "Try This" exercises to guide the writer through the process of drafting and revising a poem.
- **Refined drama chapter.** An expanded section on Drama outlining the construction of a dramatic scene through a character's goal, objective, and strategy, and the concept of a dramatic beat.
- **New visual inspiration.** New photos at the beginning of each chapter to provide fresh "Warm-Up" exercises.

- **Expanded writing opportunities.** New "Try This" exercises throughout.
- **Online manual.** An online Collaborative Exercises manual offering the instructor a variety of right-brain exercises drawn from various disciplines.

The core organizing principle of *Imaginative Writing* remains the same, which is that students in a multigenre course can benefit from playing with various writing techniques before they settle into a particular form. Much, if not most, of the advice given to students is relevant to any sort of writing and to most of the genres: The need for significant detail, for example, applies equally to narrative scene, poetic line, and theatrical dialogue; voice is a concept that applies to a character, a narrator, a memoir, a lyric persona, and so forth. My expectation is that discussing techniques and offering exercises that let students experiment with those techniques *before* they commit to a formal project will make the instruction less threatening and encourage a sense of adventure. Approaching imaginative writing from this angle illustrates the extent to which *all* writing is imaginative (as well as autobiographical) and to which different genres share similar sources and build on similar skills.

I have taken fiction and poetry as givens in a multigenre course. I have personally been convinced of drama's usefulness in developing a writer's facility (with characterization, dialogue, plot, pace, symbol). I also want to acknowledge the reestablishment in writing programs of Nonfiction as a creative art, the continuity of imaginative writing with the essay form, and the fact that emerging writers may find it easiest to begin with the material of their own lives.

The book is organized so that, roughly, the first five weeks of a semester will cover five areas of imaginative technique (image, voice, character, setting, and story); the sixth the processes of development and revision; and two weeks each devoted to creative nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama.

Each chapter begins with a graphic or photographic image accompanied by a "Warm-Up" prompt, which may be assigned in class or as a journal entry or replaced by one of the instructor's invention.

Each technique chapter proceeds with a discussion of that technique, including illustrations from more than one genre (some invented and some taken from established writers); "Try This" exercises linked to particular aspects of the topic; then complete selections in the various genres. Like the "Warm-Up" features, the "Try This" exercises can be used as in-class practice, assigned for journal entries, or left for the students to choose from. I think it's important, at least sometimes, to discuss resulting pieces in class, in order to get students used to a nonjudgmental discussion of roughs and written play. (This neutral way of workshopping is described at the end of the first chapter, "Invitation to the Writer.") Further comments and exercises

among the selections at the end of each chapter link the readings to the techniques discussed and suggest *briefly*—there are no questions aimed at literary interpretation—how to read the selections for what can be taken away from them and made part of a repertoire of skills. But, of course, all the selections illustrate many things, and they can be assigned in any order or quantity that suits the individual instructor. Each technique chapter ends with suggestions for "Working Toward a Draft," to aid those teachers who encourage students to be thinking toward a finished piece.

Chapter 7, "Development and Revision," suggests ways to use the material generated in the first five weeks toward the writing of finished pieces, and here too the workshop may prove a positive help to the writer through exploration rather than praise and critique. The "Try This" exercises in this chapter can be used in class or out, and if it feels right, students can be encouraged to exchange journal pieces and try developing and revising passages not their own. This chapter is followed by some examples, with discussion, of aspects of the rewriting process.

I've envisioned that for each of the final four chapters—dealing with creative nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama—one week will be spent discussing the genre and roughing out a draft, a second workshopping and working at revision. (Instructors will know what is comfortable and doable for their classes; my inclination would be to assign a short story and an essay of about 1,500 words each, three poems, and one ten-minute play.) Each of these final chapters outlines what is unique and defining about each of the genres in order to suggest ways of exploiting the particular nature of that genre and to help the students use what they have learned in the first six weeks. The chapters close with a sample format for the featured genre.

The exercises in these chapters are designed to promote development of some aspect of the genre under discussion or to aid revision in terms of focus, cutting, attention to language, originality, and so forth. At this point, the critical component of the workshop becomes relevant; students will no doubt be ready to talk about not only what sort of thing this piece of work *is* but whether and where it "works."

The order of presentation is always problematic in a writing text—everything really needs to be said at once—and many instructors will find that they would have chosen a different sequence for the techniques or the genres or both, so I'll say a little about my rationale. When I laid out the plan for the text *Writing Fiction* many years ago, I had, out of my classroom experience, a strong sense that students focusing on that form needed a sense of its structure and to face the question *What is a story?* But for the more playful and process-oriented course for which *Imaginative Writing* is intended, it seems to me that the core need and the first skill is the one represented by the irreplaceable maxim *Show; don't tell.* Again and again, I have seen an *aha!* moment in the classroom when a student suddenly

grasps the principle of addressing the senses, a technique so simple and yet so elusive. It is also often revelatory that diction and point of view direct meaning, and I have addressed this issue second. From image and voice to character is a logical progression; then to the outside world of setting; and only then to a consideration of what it means to tell a story, whether in memoir, poetic, fictional, or dramatic form.

I put development and revision together, in the middle of the book, in the hope of suggesting that these are ongoing parts of the same process, rather than representing a beginning and an end.

When I came to ordering the genres, I reasoned that creative nonfiction offers beginning writers the easiest segue from the material of their own lives and from the essay writing they find most familiar. From the personal essay or memoir to fiction may prove a short imaginative step. Poetry then leads them to focus on density and the effects of language. Finally, drama in many ways asks that they distance themselves furthest from autobiography, that they externalize everything verbally or visually.

There is nothing sacred about this order, and I have tried to balance the chapters between self-containment and linkage, so that an instructor who prefers another sequence may shop around in the text and shape his or her course to fit. In practice, I think it may be most difficult to alter the sequence of the five technique chapters, and no problem at all to switch—or omit—any of the genres.

Appendix A, "A Basic Prosody," offers more information about, and practice in, poetic form. Appendix B, "Line Editing," offers illustrations of common line-editing symbols and an opportunity for practice. A glossary of the terms covered in the text follows the appendixes.

Available with *Imaginative Writing* online is a supplement containing a revised version of the Collaborative Exercises that appeared as an appendix or teacher's manual in earlier editions. These represent a *bricolage* of suggestions for in-class play. Some involve writing, but most are taken from theater, art, dance, meditation, and physical therapy. Some instructors will be eager to try them; others may recoil from them as disruptively boisterous or dreamily New Age. But if I have any proselytizing to do, it is at this pulpit. I say this to my students, and also to teachers considering the online supplement: *Don't worry about it, go with it, give it a shot.* Students are often resistant to getting out of their chairs, embarrassed to pick up a felt-tip, reluctant to make a nonverbal sound. Yet simple stretching and breathing can break down the rigidity of the classroom. Repeated improvisations such as the "word-at-a-time story" sometimes become the cohesive social force in a writing class. Mask making sometimes begins with the groans of the artistically challenged and leads to breakthrough on character. Mirroring can teach more about narrative than a lecture on conflict or connection. I have, over several years, become convinced of the useful energy generated by each one of these exercises, and I've

tried to indicate the purpose of each one. In the meantime, however, they are presented to instructors only, in an online supplement to take or leave.

It often seems pretty well impossible to teach a course across the genres—a semester to do everything, as if you were asked to teach "Intro to Human Nature" or "The History of Work" in sixteen weeks. My hope is that this book will make it feel a little more possible. What *Imaginative Writing* is *not*, however, is comprehensive. It tries to cover the basics in a way that is sound but brief, overwhelming to neither the student nor the personality and methods of the instructor. I will be interested to hear from anyone who teaches from the book how well I have succeeded in this, and how I might improve the book in future editions (jburroway@fsu.edu).

Meanwhile, I am grateful to numbers of people, especially my colleagues at Florida State, Northwestern, and Chicago Dramatists; and always to my students and former students. Many of the readings, ideas, and exercises in this book are here thanks to their talent, invention, and spirited help. Creative writing exercises tend to be, like scientific information in a more generous time, freely offered, freely shared, and passed from hand to hand. I know that I have cadged, cobbled, and adapted my "Try This" exercises from Marta Mihalyi, Maria Irene Fornes, Aimee Beal, Margaret Rozga, Sarah Ruhl, Paula Vogel, Cheril Dumesnil, Laura-Gray Street, Mary Ann Lando, Gerald Shapiro, Matt Zambito, and Michael Kardos, many of them from the pedagogy panels of the Associated Writing Programs. Other ideas will have come to me thirdhand, or I will have forgotten where I read or heard them; to those unacknowledged, equal thanks and apologies.

I have relied on the incisiveness and generosity of my reviewers: Tara Broeckel, Oakland Community College; Shoney Flores, The University of Texas—Pan American; Kevin Kelly, University of Southern Maine; Nicholas Samaras, Montclair State University; and Liz Whiteacre, Ball State University. Of these, special thanks go to Nicholas Samaras for his generous help. I am also tremendously grateful for the insight, cheer, and forbearance of my editors, Lai T. Moy, Christopher Bennem, and Lois Tardio, to all of whom great thanks. My husband, Peter Ruppert, brings light to life and lit.

CHAPTER 1

Invitation to the Writer

> The lesson I learn over and over again—and then forget over and over again—is that writing won't be so bad once you get into it. One's reluctance is immensely powerful...it seems tiny in the grand arc of a person's life narrative, but it's the most insidious, powerful thing.
>
> *Tony Kushner*

WARM-UP

Regard the art on the cover of this book. Relax, focus, take in the colors and the composition. Then freewrite a page of anything it suggests to you, reminds you of, or makes you feel. You don't need to make sense or sentences, nor stick to the subject. Just let it flow. Put the page away for a week. Take it out and see: Is there anything here you might use? Any idea worth more thought? Any phrase or image to pursue?

You . . .

You started learning to write—at the latest—as soon as you were born. You learned within hours to recognize an "audience," and within a few days that expressing yourself would elicit a response. Your basic desires created the fundamental form of story—I want, *I want,* I WANT!—with its end in gratification (comedy) or denial (tragedy). Within a year you had begun to understand the structure of sentences and to learn rules of immense subtlety and complexity, so that for no precisely understood reason you would always say "little red wagon" rather than "red little wagon." You responded to rhythm and rhyme (*One, two. Buckle my shoe.*). You matched images and explained their meanings (*This is a giraffe. Dog is hungry.*). You invented metaphors (*My toes are soldiers.*). By the time you could speak, you were putting together personal essays about what you had done and what had happened to you and forecasting fantasies of your future exploits. By the time you started school,

you had (mostly thanks to television) watched more drama than the nobility of the Renaissance, and you understood a good deal about how a character is developed, how a joke is structured, how a narrative expectation is met, and how dramatic exposition, recognition, and reversal are achieved. You understood the unspoken rules of specific traditions—that Bugs Bunny may change costume but the Road Runner may not, that the lovers will marry, that the villain must die.

You are, in fact, a literary sophisticate. You have every right to write.

This needs saying emphatically and often, because writing is one of those things—like public speaking, flying, and garden snakes—that tends to call up unnecessary panic. Such fear is both normal (a high percentage of people feel it) and irrational (statistically, the chances of disaster are pretty low). It is true that some speakers do humiliate themselves, some planes do crash, some snakes are poisonous. Nevertheless, people do learn to speak, fly, and garden. And people learn to shrug at their dread and write.

. . . and writing . . .

All writing is imaginative. The translation of experience or thought into words is of itself an imaginative process. Although there is certainly such a thing as truth in writing, and we can spot falsity when we encounter it in print, these qualities are hard to define, hard to describe, and do not always depend on factual accuracy or inaccuracy. Often what is *most* original—that is, imaginative—is precisely what "rings true."

Aristotle said that when you change the form of a thing you change its purpose. For example, the purpose of an algebra class is to teach algebra. But if you take a photo of the class, the purpose of the photo *cannot* be to teach algebra. The picture would probably serve the purpose of commemorating the class and the people in it. On the other hand, if you wrote a short story about that class, its purpose might be (not to teach algebra or to commemorate the class, but) to reveal something about the emotional undertow, the conflict in or between students, the hidden relationships in that apparently staid atmosphere.

It's impossible to tell *the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth* in words, because words are of a different form than experience, and their choice is determined by the vast array of cultural and personal influences. Writers learn very quickly that a written incident is not necessarily credible because it "really happened," and that convincing writing is in the writing and not in the facts. When you write about an experience, you put it in a new form and therefore furnish it with a new purpose. Part of the hard work and the pleasure of writing is discovering what that purpose is. You will never exactly "catch" an experience you have lived,

but you may both discover and reveal new insights in the recasting of that experience.

All writing is autobiographical as well as invented. Just as it's impossible to write the whole and literal truth about any experience, so it's also impossible to invent without drawing on your own experience, which has furnished your brain. Your view of yourself, the place you live, the people you know, the institutions you live with, your view of nature and God or the gods will inform not only your dreams and daydreams, what you say, wear, think, and do, but also everything you write. What you write will inevitably reveal to a certain extent both what you think the world is like and what you think it *should* be like.

Between the two impossibilities—of perfectly capturing your experience in words and of avoiding it altogether—lies the territory that we call "creative." Begin by writing whatever comes to you, recording your observations, trying out your ideas, indulging your fantasies. *Then* figure out what you want to make of it, what its purpose is, and what it means. Then work toward making it "work"—that is, toward making it meaningful for the reader who is your partner in the imaginative act.

. . . and reading . . .

At the same time, you yourself need to become a reader of a writerly sort. This means reading greedily, not just for entertainment but also focusing on the craft, the choices, and techniques of the author; "reading the greats," in novelist Alan Cheuse's words, "in that peculiar way that writers read, attentive to the peculiarities of the language...soaking up numerous narrative strategies and studying various approaches to that cave in the deep woods where the human heart hibernates."

When you study a piece of writing as a student of literature, you focus on understanding what is there on the page and how the parts fit together, in order to tease out the story's significance. Reading as a writer involves all that, but it is more concentrated, more active, and more selfish. It involves asking not only *What does this mean?* but also *How does it work? Why has the author made this choice of imagery, voice, atmosphere? What techniques of language, pacing, character contribute to this effect?* As a writerly reader you pay close attention to the rhythm and flow of the language, to the way word choice influences an effect, to voice and point of view as means of building narrative—in Francine Prose's words, "not only who was speaking but who was being spoken to, where the listener and speaker were, and when and why the event—that is, the telling of the story—was occurring." This kind of reading becomes in itself an imaginative act as you put yourself in the position of the author to intuit the reason for her choices. Then the question

naturally occurs: Can I *use* this effect, try these rhythms, create this sort of atmosphere? It is only one step further to imitation of such strategies, and to using imitation as a way of developing your own skills.

Readers/writers sometimes become impatient with this process. "How do you know the author didn't just want to do it that way?" The answer is: You don't. But everything on the page is there because the writer chose that it should be there, and the effectiveness of the piece depends on those choices. The British critic F. R. Leavis used to observe that a poem is not a frog. In order to understand the way a frog works you must kill it, then splay out the various respiratory, digestive, muscular systems, and so forth. But when you "take apart" a piece of literature to discover how it is made, and then put it back together by reading it again, it is more alive than before. It will resonate with all you have learned, and you as a writer will know a little better how to reproduce such vitality.

. . . and this book . . .

My creative writing workshop exchanged a few classes with a group of student choreographers. The first time we came into the dance theater, we writers sat politely down in our seats with our notebooks on our laps. The choreographer-dancers did stretches on the carpet, headstands on the steps; some sat backward on the chairs; one folded herself down into a seat like a teabag in a teacup. When they started to dance they were given a set of instructions: *Group A is rolling through, up, and under; Group B is blue Tuesday; Group C is weather comes from the west.* The choreographers began to invent movement; each made up a "line" of dance. They repeated and altered it. They bumped into each other, laughed, repeated, rearranged, and danced it through. They did it again. They adjusted. They repeated. They danced it through. Nobody was embarrassed and nobody gave up. They tried it again. One of the young writers turned to me with a face of luminous discovery. "We don't *play* enough," she said.

That's the truth. Writing is such a solitary occupation, and we are so used to moiling at it until it's either perfect or *due*, that our first communal experience of our writing also tends to be awful judgment. Even alone, we internalize the criticism we anticipate and become harsh critics of ourselves. "The progress of any writer," said the great poet Ted Hughes, "is marked by those moments when he manages to outwit his own police system."

Imaginative Writing assumes that you will play before you work—dance before performing, doodle before fiddling with, fantasize before forming, *anything goes* before *finish something.* This is not an unusual idea among writers and teachers of writing. ("Indulge yourself in your first drafts," says novelist Jonathan Lethem, "and write against yourself in revisions.") But it is easier to preach than to practice.

Nevertheless, most of the techniques that writers use are relevant to most forms of imaginative writing and can be learned by playing around in any form. So the first six chapters of this book talk about some techniques that are useful in any sort of writing or are relevant to more than one genre, and suggest ways to play with those techniques. The purpose of these chapters is to free the imagination. The seventh chapter talks about ways to develop and revise your experiments into a finished piece. The last four chapters discuss what is particular to each of four genres, and how you can mold some of what you have written toward each of them.

Note: The word "genre" can be confusing because it has two distinct but overlapping meanings when applied to writing. In the first definition it refers to the different kinds or forms of literature—nonfiction, poetry, fiction, drama, and so forth—and that is the way it is used throughout this book. In its second meaning, "genre" refers to certain traditions within fiction, as a *western, detective story, spy story, romance, science fiction, horror,* and so forth. These fiction genres are often discouraged in creative writing courses because they rely on set narrative elements that have less to do with good writing than with the expectations of particular fans.

The romance, for example, must have a plucky heroine, a handsome hero with a secret past, a dark lady, a mansion, a forest, and usually a flight through the woods in scanty clothing. Many instructors feel that whereas learning the techniques of good writing may help you write good genre fiction, learning the particular traditions of a given fictional genre will not necessarily help you write well or honestly in the tradition called "mainstream" or "literary."

The tendency of recent literature is in any case to move further away from rigid categories, toward a loosening or crossing of genre (in the sense of literary form). Many writers are eager to experiment with pieces that blur the distinction between two genres or even follow two genre patterns at once. So "short short" stories may have elements of poetry or essay; the "prose poem" may be seen as a lyric or a story. An essay might be structured with a refrain. Of course, the drama has always employed techniques across the arts of sight, sound, and movement, and technology has unleashed experimentation unimaginable just a couple of generations ago, from music videos to TV series with Shakespearean ambition. "Comic books" have matured into graphic novels. "Motion poetry" matches poet to artist in moving image; the video essay and the blog pop up on every digital platform. Michael Chabon and others write detective or science fiction with literary ambition and intent—"genre fiction" pressing at the bounds of "the fiction genre" with results that have been called "slipstream" or "interstitial" fiction.

So there is a lot of "do this" in the following pages, but a good deal more of "try this." The overriding idea of the book is *play*—serious, strenuous, dedicated, demanding, exhilarating, enthusiastic, repeated, perfected play. It

is the kind of play that makes you a superior swimmer or singer, a first-rank guitar, pool, polo, piano, or chess player. As with any sport or musical skill, a writer's power grows by the practice of the moves and the mastering of the instrument.

Insofar as writing is a skill, it can only be learned by doing. Insofar as writing is "inspired," it may pour out of you obsessively, feverishly, without your seeming to have to make any effort or even without your seeming to have any responsibility for it. When that happens, it feels wonderful, as any writer will tell you. Yet over and over again, writers attest to the fact that the inspiration only comes with, and as a result of, the doing.

. . . and your journal . . .

While you use this book you will be writing one—a journal that should be, first of all, a physical object with which you feel comfortable. Some writers keep notes in a shoebox or under the bed, but your journal probably needs to be light enough to carry around easily, sturdy enough to stand up to serious play, large enough to operate as a capacious holdall for your thoughts. Think of it as a handbag, a backpack, a trunk, a cupboard, an attic, a warehouse of your mind. Everything can go into it: stuff you like and what you paid too much for, what Aunt Lou gave you and the thing you found in the road, this out-of-date whatsit and that high-tech ware. You never know what you're going to need; absolutely anything may prove useful later on.

TRY THIS 1.1

In other words, write any sort of thing in your journal, and write various kinds of things:

- An observation
- An overheard conversation
- Lists
- Questions I would like answered
- Your response to a piece of music
- A rough draft of a letter
- Names for characters
- Quotations from what you are reading
- The piece of your mind you'd like to give so-and-so
- An idea for a story
- A memory
- A dream
- A few lines of a poem
- A fantasy conversation
- Titles of things you are never going to write
- Something else

Your journal is totally forgiving; it is 100 percent rough draft; it passes no judgments.

Throughout *Imaginative Writing* there will be prompts, trigger lines, and ideas for playing in your journal. Here are a few general suggestions:

- **Freewrite.** Gertrude Stein called this "automatic writing." Either on a regular schedule or at frequent intervals, sit down and write without any plan whatsoever of what you are going to write. Write anything that comes into your head. It doesn't matter what it is *at all*. This is the equivalent of volleying at tennis or improvisation at the piano; it puts you in touch with the instrument and limbers the verbal muscles.
- **Focused freewrite.** Pick a topic and focus on it. Write for five or ten minutes, saying anything at all about it—*anything at all*—in any order.
- **Brainstorm.** Start with the question *What if...?* Finish the question and then free-associate around it, absolutely anything that pops into your head—ideas, situations, connections, solutions, and images, no matter how bizarre. This is a problem-solving technique that can also generate energy for imaginative writing. If you need an idea, or if your character is facing a decision, or if you don't know what your setting looks like—whatever the problem, whatever idea might be struggling to surface—brainstorm it and let your mind run free.
- **Using the world.** A journal is not a diary. Your journal may include your own feelings and problems, but training yourself to observe the outside world will help develop the skills of an imaginative writer. Make a daily habit of recording something you experienced or noticed. It may be an overheard remark, an unexpected sight, a person who caught your attention, even a news item or something you learned in a class. Knowing that you are going to write every day will give you a habit of listening and seeing with writing in mind. A writer is a kind of benevolent cannibal who eats the world—or at least one who will experience the world with an eye and ear toward what use can be made of it.

Make a habit, rather than a chore, of writing in your journal. If you skip a day, it's not the end of the world, but it may well be that, as with a physical workout, you have to coax or cajole yourself into writing regularly before you get to the point when you look forward to that part of your life, can't wait for it, can't do without it. You will know some of the patterns that help you create a habit. Write first thing in the morning? At the same hour every day? After a shower? With a cup of coffee? Before you fall asleep? Use your self-discipline to make yourself sit down and write, but once you get there, tell your inner critic to hush, give yourself permission to write whatever you please, and *play.*

TRY THIS 1.2

Here is a list of lists:

- Things on which I am an expert
- Things I have lost
- Signs of winter
- What is inside my body
- Things people have said to me
- What to take on the journey
- Things I have forgotten
- Things to make lists of

Pick any one of these items to generate a list in your journal.
Pick a single word from your list and write a paragraph about it. Is this the germ of a memoir or a story?
Write a single line about each item on the list. Is this the start of a poem?

Journal Excerpts

What follows is a series of snippets, generously offered from the journals of well-established writers, to indicate what a variety of entries a journal might contain. Some of these may be the germ of a story, novel, essay, poem, or play; some may never find their way into a published piece. Some are observations, some are fantasy, some are lists, names, an image, an action, a quotation. Some may suggest a kind of writing you wouldn't think to include in your own journal. Try it.

FROM THE JOURNAL OF: Ayelet Waldman

Old graveyard:
Delia Floyd
Mehitabel Witham
Joshua Horton
Seth Hewins
Sally Prince Holt
Jonah Fisher
Mehitabel Faulkner
Hepziabah Faulkner "I am ready"

Old man in walker—freckled pate, zipper cardigan, and black shoes two sizes too large. You could fit two fingers between his heel and the back of the shoe. They're obviously worn, but not at all worn out. He must have bought them years ago, before his body began to shrink. Even his feet are smaller than they were.

FROM THE JOURNAL OF: Billy Collins

"People think there is no preparation to write poetry. Not like painting, or music. So in my kingdom, you would have to learn to play the trumpet before you would be allowed to write a poem."

Kafka: "The meaning of life is that it will end."

In America, we cannot seem to get enough of what we don't need.

The mind needs to get used to something better than television.

as in music there are "rests" in poetry—obviously at the end of lines and stanzas but anywhere else the poet has sufficient control of cadence to give the reader no option but to pause.

"motives for writing: to continue to speak after you are dead and (from daniel menaker) to win the love of strangers."

celery salt is an insult to the bloody mary

FROM THE JOURNAL OF: Cris Mazza (as a college-student, 19 years old)

But right then another arm-lock on my neck. The back of my chair was between us (I sitting, he standing), but I felt those shoulders over my own.
"I need to beat you up once a day for my only meanness—it's the only time all day I have physical communication with someone." Ha Ha.
"Me too."
That was the real laugh, I mean, he really laughed. I don't know why. But he said we need each other.

Beauty too
intense to
be that of
a child,
too honest
to be that
of an adult

sprawled out
like a rag doll
someone had
thrown up
there.

not a crime—
a reality

(continued)

I knew how she felt, the way my entrails were fluttering, the way I danced around inside when a slow-moving, slow-talking narrow-eyed man tried it with ME.

Yes, I overheard something. I wasn't listening though. I was thinking about something else. When his eyes hit, wham—like that—then I was part of it all right. I knew it. I had to help carry the AV equipment back for that reason.

FROM THE JOURNAL OF: Patricia Henley

"carry me" = take me

"levee hollers"—is/was this a common term? Did someone's mama and daddy meet at a levee holler?

Axe Jesus. A bumper sticker.

Jimmy's grandpa has a jar of coins buried somewhere and a roomful of Elvis memorabilia. Or maybe it's just music memorabilia.

Lucky was sent to live with Quakers at a boarding school in Pennsylvania when the schools were closed due to de-segregation. Arrangements had been made. She was seven years old. She had a suitcase from the goodwill and a cardboard box of books. She drank whole milk straight from the cow. Her own mother, when she saw her, seemed less and less like where she came from.

FROM THE JOURNAL OF: Philip Graham

There was no anger in her silence, like my father's; rather, fear. And couldn't fear be soothed into something else?

Those drawings were how she talked to me, a sign language caught on paper, shadings of her secret self I could spend my life translating.

I'd somehow engineered a strange reversal of personalities.

John Hawkes's novel *Sweet Willam*: the grotesque rendered even more vivid by the elegance of Hawkes's prose.

the name of a malaria drug, Halfan

He'd twist himself into a little knot, try to coil himself so tight he'd finally feel something besides this damned airy floating. But he was never able to squeeze himself into pain; not even a tiny twinge: not even a hint of the lightest touch.

(continued)

Most of the dead floated, traveling with the help of their own invisible wind. Only those newly arrived kept walking, an echo of the life they'd so recently lived... No blindness at all but a world alive with scent and touch, antennae exchanging encyclopedic caresses. It was all he'd ever hoped to accomplish in his lifetime: the afterlife was a virtual reality, beyond any technological breakthrough. There was nowhere he couldn't enter, no person's secrets he couldn't uncover.

Those ants pushing and pulling away the smallest pieces of her cracker. But it was *hers*, and she cried out, but the ants ignored her. She cried out again, now in angry frustration, and began to crawl after them. Her mother scooped her up at her wails, but no soothing could quiet her. She had no words yet to explain to her mother, and the ants escaped.

Following invisible designs inside herself, a picture she drew that I'd never see.

I wanted to bring her back, to have her arrive from wherever she was inside herself and see me at the table, across from her, waiting patiently.

the choppy, swaying gait of goats

He'd always believed that humans were some clever sort of larvae, firing off constructs—Stonehenge to the World Trade Center, knife to computer—that were bits of brain. And it was all leading to an artificial intelligence—that wasn't artificial at all, being a product of brain—that would finally leave the larval stage behind and yet be its apotheosis, its crowning, transcendent glory.

TRY THIS 1.3

Take a notebook with you to any public place and make a list of the proper names you find there (a graveyard, a candy store, a restaurant, a street, a theater...). Write a paragraph of anything at all that these names, or one of them, suggests to you.

TRY THIS 1.4

Listen, alone and intently, to a piece of music you care about. After listening for five or fifteen minutes, write anything the music suggests to you. If it has lyrics, don't use the words of the song, but the images in your own brain, the words that paint your feeling. Don't try to make sense, or even sentences; let the music dictate your words.

TRY THIS 1.5
Go back to (or make) your list of "Questions I want answered." Pick one. Go online and research (on at least four sites) what is known about that question. If it is not an answerable question ("What is the meaning of life?"), you'll find much more written about it. Make notes in your journal. Then put away the notes and write, quickly, what you seem to have learned, in the form of a poem or a dialogue.

TRY THIS 1.6
Troll the web for sites that cross genres, either within literature or by linking literature with another art: prose poems, motion poems, poem essays, video essays, graphic novels, art songs, texts for dance—any one of those phrases will start a search. Choose a cross-genre form that attracts you, and write about it in your journal.

A word about your workshop . . .

Many of us think of the primary function of a writing workshop as being to criticize, in order to improve, whatever piece of writing is before us. This is absolutely natural, not only because of the way the writing workshop has evolved over the years but because nothing is more natural than to judge art. We do it all the time, and we do it out of a valid impulse. If you tell me you've just seen a movie, I don't ask the plot; I ask: *How was it?* Art *sets out to* affect us emotionally and intellectually, and whether it has achieved this is of the first interest. The poet and critic John Ciardi said of literature that "it is never only about ideas, but about the experience of ideas," and the first thing we want to know is, naturally, "how was the experience?"

But if the first thing you and your workshop expect is a writer at *play*, and if in order to play you banish your inner critic and give yourself permission to experiment, doodle, and dance, it doesn't make a lot of sense to subject that play to immediate assessment. In any case it's likely that the fragments produced by the exercises in the early chapters of this book will be read aloud rather than reproduced and read in advance. I'm going to suggest that for most of the time this book is being used, you avoid the phrases *I like, I don't like, This works, This doesn't work*—and all their equivalents. It may be harder to forgo praise than blame, but praise should be a controlled substance too. Instead, discipline yourself to explore whatever is

in front of you. Not *What I like,* but *What this piece is like.* Interrogate it, suggest its context, explore its nature and its possibilities:

- *What is the conflict in this situation?*
- *This reminds me of...*
- *It's like...*
- *I think this character wants...*
- *What if...?*
- *The rhythm is...*
- *Could this be expanded to...?*
- *The atmosphere seems...* and so forth.

This kind of descriptive, inquisitive, and neutral discussion of writing is *hard.* It will pay off in the freedom that each writer feels to write and in the flexibility of critical response you're developing in the workshop. In the later part of the course, when everyone is writing in a particular form and revision is the legitimate focus of the work, there will be a time to discuss not only *what this piece is trying to do* but also where and whether it succeeds. At that point, critique will help. This later critical function of the workshop is discussed further in Chapter 7, "Development and Revision." Meanwhile keep in mind that even when you arrive at the point that criticism is relevant and helpful, there are a few basic protocols for the workshop that should always be observed:

- It is the obligation of each reader to prepare in advance, focusing on what succeeds in the piece, and where and why, then noting judiciously where improvement is needed and why.
- The piece is under discussion. The author is not. Make sure your comments relate to the nature of the writing and not (even by implication) to the character of the writer. Separate the writer from the voice or character.
- Continue to interrogate the piece: *What kind is it? What does it suggest? What is its apparent aim?*
- The goal of the workshop is to make *this* piece the best that it can be. There's no place for dismissal or disregard. On the contrary, the workshop is there to identify and foster the promise in every story, essay, poem, or drama.
- As the writer, your obligation is to listen attentively, take everything in, and keep your natural defensiveness in check. Your workshop leader may (or may not) offer you a chance to speak. But this is the least important part of the workshop process for *you.* The most important part comes later, when you get back to work. Then (and only then) you will begin to sort out what's most useful.

TRY THIS 1.7

Make use of these prompts or trigger lines for easy freewrites. Pick one of them—quickly; don't think about it too much—write it down and keep writing. Anything at all. Whatever the prompt suggests. Keep going. A little bit more.

- This journal is...
- My mother used to have...
- What a jerk. He always...
- The house we lived in...
- In this dream I was...
- She got out of the car...
- The first thing I want in the morning...

More to Read

Bernays, Anne, and Pamela Painter. *What If...?* New York: Longman, 2003. Print.

Friedman, Bonnie. *Writing Past Dark.* New York: HarperCollins, 1993. Print.

Prose, Francine. *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them.* New York: HarperCollins, 2007. Print.

CHAPTER 2

Image

- *Image and Imagination*
- *Concrete, Significant Details*
- *Figures of Speech*

When I talk about pictures in my mind I am talking, quite specifically, about images that shimmer round the edges... You just lie low and let them develop.
Joan Didion

G. Baden/Corbis

WARM-UP

Describe this scene using each of the five senses at least once. Supply the color. Let us see the sea. What sounds do we hear? What smell predominates? What is the texture of the sand or surfboard or water? What does the youth taste? Do your choices create a mood, a judgment, an emotion?

Image and Imagination

There is a simple trick at the heart of imaginative writing.

If I say, "Not everything that appears to be valuable is actually valuable," you will understand me in a general kind of way, but you won't think I've said anything very interesting (and you might feel a little preached at). Whereas if I say, "All that glistens is not gold," you literally "see" what I "mean."

The trick is that if you write in words that evoke the senses—if your language is full of things that can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched—you create a world your reader can enter.

Mary Karr begins *The Liars Club* this way:

> *My sharpest memory is of a single instant surrounded by dark. I was seven, and our family doctor knelt before me where I sat on a mattress on the bare floor. He wore a yellow golf shirt unbuttoned so that sprouts of hair showed in a V shape on his chest. I had never seen him in anything but a white starched shirt and a gray tie. The change unnerved me. He was pulling at the hem of my favorite nightgown—a pattern of Texas bluebonnets bunched into nosegays tied with a ribbon against a field of nappy white cotton. I had tucked my knees under it to make a tent. He could easily have yanked the thing over my head with one motion, but something made him gentle. "Show me the marks," he said....*

We do not know the situation here, but the details—the dark, the mattress, bare floor, the sprouts of hair where a gray tie should be, the knees tucked under the gown, the doctor's gentle voice—draw us immediately into the situation and make us hungry to know just what this child has suffered. We are "hooked."

It's no accident that the words *image* and *imagination* have the same root (Latin *imago*, a picture or portrayal), because what all imaginative writing has in common is that it calls up pictures in the mind. Any sort of writing—reports, treatises, theories, instructions—may be enlivened by examples. But the kinds of writing we group under the heading *imaginative*—poetry, song lyrics, play scripts, film scripts, personal essays, memoirs, stories, novels—exist fundamentally as re-presentations. They portray people, places, and objects as if physically present. Any particular piece of imaginative writing may or may not be "imaginary" in the sense of being made up; it may or may not have its origins in "real" people or what "really" happened. What all such pieces invariably have in common is that the writing calls up sense impressions in the mind—readers *see, hear, smell, taste,* and *feel* the scene by responding through their imaginations.

Novelist Robert Olen Butler points out that *all* art objects are sensuous and are produced by a process that is sensuous rather than logical. Artists

in other media than literature are clear about the nature of their process, because they work with material that is fundamentally of the senses. The musician deals in sound, the painter in color and composition, the sculptor in texture, the dancer in bodily movement. But because as writers we deal in a medium of words, which are abstract symbols, we may find it harder to set logic and argument aside. Writing as an art begins when we surrender ourselves to the world of images.

An image is a word or series of words that evokes one or more of the five senses. *An image appeals to the senses.* This is the foundation of imaginative writing. If you can "grok" that fact (a useful word that means to understand in the gut as well as the head), you are on your way to being a writer.

Here is a thought that does not contain an image:

It is best to consider consequences before proceeding.

Here is an image that contains the same thought:

Look before you leap.

A thought without an image:

It's important to reassure your offspring of your affection.

An image that contains the thought:

Have you hugged your child today?

A thought without an image:

The situation is being manipulated by peripheral interests.

An image that contains the thought:

Wag the dog.

A thought without an image:

I will do everything in my power to overturn this unjust verdict.

An image that contains the thought:

I will fall like an ocean on that court! (Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*)

A thought without an image:

The verses I am writing have no vitality; they are unattractive and stale.

An image that contains the thought:

They are not pigs, they are not even fish, / Though they have a piggy and a fishy air—(Sylvia Plath, "Stillborn")

Notice that every case of flat writing above is full of abstractions (*actually, affection, power, vitality, before*), generalizations (*everything, all,*

consequences, verses), and judgments (*valuable, important, best, unjust, no vitality, unattractive, stale*). When these are replaced with nouns that call up a sense image (*gold, child, dog, ocean, court, pigs, fish*) and with verbs that represent actions we can visualize (*glisten, look, leap, hug, wag, fall*), the writing comes alive. At the same time, the ideas, generalizations, and judgments are *also* present in the images.

Notice too that Miller's image "fall like an ocean" has weight and texture; Plath's image of poems that have a "fishy air" suggests not just the sight of a fish but its smell. All of the five senses go into the making of imagery, and a writer working at full stretch will make use of them all.

It's not that abstractions, generalizations, and judgments are useless or bad writing in themselves; on the contrary, they are important to all human communication.

- *Abstractions* are the names of ideas or concepts, which cannot in themselves be experienced directly through one or more of our senses, such as *intelligence, criticism, love, anger.*
- *Generalizations* can only be vaguely visualized because they include too many of a given group: *something, creatures, kitchen equipment.*
- *Judgments* tell us what to think about something instead of showing it: *beautiful, insidious, suspiciously.*

Human beings are able to communicate largely because they are capable of these kinds of conceptual thinking.

But it is sense impressions that make writing vivid, and there is a physiological reason for this. Information taken in through the five senses is processed in the *limbic system* of the brain, which generates sensuous responses in the body: heart rate, blood/oxygen flow, muscle reaction, and so forth. Emotional response consists of these physiological reactions, so in order to have an effect on your reader's emotions, you must literally get into the limbic system, which you can only do through the senses. Now, the images of a film strike the eye directly, as *images*, just as the sounds of music strike the ear directly as sound, the smells of perfume or food strike the nose directly, and so forth. But the images of written literature (including sound, smell, taste, feel) strike the eye as little symbols on the page, which must be translated by the brain into the sound that these symbols represent, which must then be translated into the sense that our language signifies by that particular sound. It's a complicated process that demands a lot of a reader, who will thank you for making it worthwhile.

It is a dynamic process, to which readers actively bring their own memories and experience. Words not only *denote*, or literally refer to their meaning, but *connote*, suggest or imply through layers of connection in our experience and culture. Often, using the imagery of one sense will suggest the other senses as well and will resonate with ideas, qualities, and

emotions that are not stated. Strong images tend to demand active verbs that make for energy in the prose or the poetic line.

Here is a single sentence from Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, in which the heroine describes the zoology building where her father worked when she was a child.

> *The cellar smells strongly of mouse droppings, a smell which wafts upward through the whole building, getting fainter as you go up, mingling with the smell of green Dustbane used to clean the floors, and with the other smells, the floor polish and furniture wax and formaldehyde and snakes.*

We are ostensibly given only a series of smells from a child's point of view, but as those smells rise we experience traveling upward through the building, also seeing the floors, the furniture, the snakes. The "rising" smells also help build the suggestion of the sinister, from *mouse* to *Dustbane* to *formaldehyde* to *snakes*. There is an echo of fear implied in "getting fainter as you go up," which seems to apply to courage as well as smells.

Notice also how the passage bristles with active verbs. These smells don't just lie there, they *waft, get fainter, mingle*; you *go*; the Dustbane is *used to clean*. This is important. Active verbs are images too. "Look before you leap" contains no visible objects, but we can see the actions. Passive verbs, linking verbs, all forms of the verb *to be*, invite flat, generalized writing, whereas active verbs jump-start the mind.

TRY THIS 2.1

Open a textbook, a how-to book, a form letter, something not intended to be a work of the imagination. Identify words that represent abstractions, generalizations, and/or judgments. Make a list of at least ten of these. Pick two or three of them and invent an image that suggests each word. Let your imagination loose—this is a sense impression, not a definition! Examples:

Capitalism
Dotted line across Nevada
Rollerblade straight:
Sign here.

Shame
Okra in the gumbo.
One cross-section surfaces:
Perfect flower,
Pool of slime.

Or this succinct example from Barbara Drake:

Hunger
How terrible—this little blob of jelly has a mouth.

Concrete, Significant Details

> The greatest writers are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter.
>
> *William Strunk, Jr.*

Writers are frequently advised: *show, don't tell.* What this means is that it is crucial to address the senses. Vivid writing contains **concrete, significant details.**

- *Concrete* means that there is an image, something that can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched.
- *Significant* means that the specific image also suggests an abstraction, generalization, or judgment.
- *Detail* means that there is a degree of focus and specificity.

The notion of *detail* is important to the image because it moves away from the generalized and toward the particular. For example, *creature* is a generalized notion, hard to see except in the vaguest way. *Animal* is still vague; *four-legged animal* is a little more specific; *domestic animal* a little more; *dog* narrows the field; *mixed-breed Shepherd* we can see; *old Sammy asleep on the red rug, his haunches twitching in his dream* brings the dog into sharp focus in our minds. At the same time this last sentence resonates with the ideas of age and uneasy sleep. If it said *his teeth bared and gnashing in his dream,* we'd also guess that old Sam has a capacity for meanness. Notice how the narrowing specificity of the noun invites active verbs.

TRY THIS 2.2
Begin with the largest general category you can think of—minerals, food, structures—think big. Then narrow the category step by step, becoming more specific until you have a single detailed image. Try it again with the same large category but narrow in another direction. Can you, *without naming a quality,* make your image suggest an idea or direct our attitude toward the thing you describe?

If specificity as well as concreteness is crucial to vivid writing, so too is the significance carried in those concrete details; the ideas or qualities that they suggest; the way they reveal character, attract, or warn us; the way they lead us to think and feel. A list of physical details without such hints will not move us: *The lawn is green; there are four trees; there is a white picket fence about three feet high and a flagstone walk leading up to the white door.* We want to have our intellects and emotions also directed toward the *meaning* of the details.

A survey of any bookshelf will turn up dozens of examples of this principle. Here, for instance, is a scene from Anne Tyler's *Accidental Tourist*. The protagonist's wife has left him and he is having trouble sleeping.

> *The dog, sighing, roused himself and dropped off the bed to pad downstairs behind him. The floorboards were cool underfoot, the kitchen linoleum cooler still; there was a glow from the refrigerator as Macon poured himself a glass of milk. He went to the living room and turned on the TV. Generally some black-and-white movie was running—men in suits and felt hats, women with padded shoulders. He didn't try to follow the plot. He took small, steady sips of milk, feeling the calcium traveling to his bones. Hadn't he read that calcium cures insomnia? He absently stroked the cat, who had somehow crept into his lap. It was much too hot to have a cat in his lap, especially this one—a loose-strung, gray tweed female who seemed made of some unusually dense substance. And the dog, most often, would be lying on top of his feet. "It's just you and me, old buddies," Macon would tell them. The cat made a comma of sweat across his bare thighs.*

In this passage, Tyler makes continual reference to the senses, letting us feel the floor, the cat, and the heat; see the glow of the refrigerator and the TV; taste the milk and the "calcium traveling to his bones"; hear the dog sigh and the man talking to the animals. The writing is alive because we do in fact live through our sense perceptions, and Tyler takes us past words and through thought to let us perceive the scene in this way.

At the same time, a number of ideas not stated reverberate off the images. We are aware of generalizations the author does not need to make because we will make them ourselves. Tyler could have had her character "tell" us: *The house felt eerie. I was desperately lonely and neither the television nor the animals were really company. I thought if I did something sensible and steady it would help, but I just felt trapped. When I tried to be cheerful it got worse.* This version would be very flat, and none of it is necessary. The eeriness is inherent in the light of the refrigerator and TV; the loneliness in the sigh, the sips, and the absent stroking of the cat. The sense of entrapment is in the cat on his thighs and the dog on his feet. The emotion of the paragraph begins with a sigh and ends in sweat. Notice how deftly Tyler tells us—"men in suits and felt hats, women with padded shoulders"—that at this late hour, all there is on TV is film noir, which adds a connotation of further eeriness, seediness, and despair.

John Gardner, in *The Art of Fiction*, speaks of concrete details as "proofs," which establish in the reader such firm confidence that the author is an authority, that we will believe whatever she or he tells us. An author who is vague and opinionated, on the other hand, makes us uneasy and suspicious.

And this applies to characters as well—a fact you can exploit. Any character—whether in a memoir, a fiction, poetry, or drama—who speaks in generalizations and judgments will undermine our trust.

> *It is odd but I must tell you that I have never felt so self-assured, so splendid, so brilliant. . . . Apparently, it is necessary to find someone completely inferior to appreciate one's own excellence. To be a prince in name is nothing. To be a prince in essence—it's heaven, it's pure joy.*
>
> Ivona, Princess of Burgundia, *Witold Gombrowicz*

We don't have to know anything about this character or the play he comes from to know that we mistrust his judgment.

This book has begun by insisting on imagery because it is so central to literature and also because many beginning writers try to make their, or their characters', emotions felt by merely naming them, and so fail to let us experience those emotions. Here is a passage from a young writer, which fails through lack of appeal to the senses.

> *Debbie was a very stubborn and completely independent person and was always doing things her way despite her parents' efforts to get her to conform. Her father was an executive in a dress manufacturing company and was able to afford his family all the luxuries and comforts of life. But Debbie was completely indifferent to her family's affluence.*

This passage contains a number of judgments we might or might not share with the author, and she has not convinced us that we do. What constitutes stubbornness? Independence? Indifference? Affluence? Further, since the judgments are supported by generalizations, we have no sense of the individuality of the characters, which alone would bring them to life on the page. What things was she always doing? What efforts did her parents make to get her to conform? What sort of executive is the father? What dress manufacturing company? What luxuries and comforts?

> *Debbie would wear a tank top to a tea party if she pleased, with fluorescent earrings and ankle-strap sandals.*
>
> *"Oh, sweetheart," Mrs. Chiddister would stand in the doorway wringing her hands. "It's not nice."*
>
> *"Not who?" Debbie would say, and add a fringed belt.*
>
> *Mr. Chiddister was Artistic Director of the Boston branch of Cardin, and had a high respect for what he called "elegant textures," which ranged from handwoven tweed to gold filigree, and which he willingly offered his daughter. Debbie preferred her laminated bangles.*

We have not passed a final judgment on the merits of these characters, but we know a good deal more about them, and we have drawn certain interim conclusions that are our own and have not been forced on us by

the author. Debbie is independent of her parents' values, rather careless of their feelings, energetic, a little trashy. Mrs. Chiddister is quite ineffectual. Mr. Chiddister is a snob, though maybe Debbie's taste is so bad we'll end up on his side.

But maybe that isn't at all what the author had in mind. The point is that we weren't allowed to know what the author did have in mind. Perhaps it was more like this version.

> *One day Debbie brought home a copy of Ulysses. Mrs. Strum called it "filth" and threw it across the sunporch. Debbie knelt on the parquet and retrieved her bookmark, which she replaced. "No, it's not," she said.*
>
> *"You're not so old I can't take a strap to you!" Mr. Strum reminded her.*
>
> *Mr. Strum was controlling stockholder of Readywear Conglomerates, and was proud of treating his family, not only on his salary, but also on his expense account. The summer before he had taken them to Belgium, where they toured the American Cemetery and the torture chambers of Ghent Castle. Entirely ungrateful, Debbie had spent the rest of the trip curled up in the hotel with a shabby copy of some poems.*

Now we have a much clearer understanding of *stubbornness, independence, indifference,* and *affluence*—both their natures and the value we are to place on them. This time our judgment is heavily weighted in Debbie's favor, partly because people who read books have a sentimental sympathy with other people who read books, but also because we hear hysteria in "filth" and "take a strap to you," whereas Debbie's resistance is quiet and strong. Mr. Strum's attitude toward his expense account suggests that he's corrupt, and his choice of "luxuries" is morbid. The passage does contain two overt judgments, the first being that Debbie was "entirely ungrateful." Notice that by the time we get to this, we're aware that the judgment is Mr. Strum's and that Debbie has little enough to be grateful for. We understand not only what the author says but also that she means the opposite of what she says, and we feel doubly clever to get it; that is the pleasure of irony. Likewise, the judgment that the book of poems is "shabby" shows Mr. Strum's crass materialism toward what we know to be the finer things.

TRY THIS 2.3

Pick a vivid passage of fiction or creative nonfiction and *spoil* it by replacing specific details with generalizations and judgments. Exchange with a person who has similarly spoiled a favorite passage. Create a new and different passage by replacing the generalizations and judgments with your own choice of sensory details. Compare the results.

TRY THIS 2.4
Write down a bumper sticker you like. (It's a good idea to exchange with someone else so you are working with one you don't actually remember.) Describe the car (van, truck, SUV) this bumper sticker is stuck on—make, model, year, color, condition. Open the door. Describe the smells and textures. Name three objects you find. Name a fourth object you're surprised to find there. Look up. Here comes the owner. Who, walking how, wearing what, carrying what, with what facial expression? The owner says something. What?

Figures of Speech

> A metaphor goes out and comes back; it is a fetching motion of the imagination.
>
> *Tony Hoagland*

English is a language unusually rich in *tropes*, or **figures of speech**—that is, expressions not meant to be taken literally but as standing for something related in some way (the word *trope* comes from a Greek word meaning *to twist* or *turn*). Tropes almost invariably involve an image. The number and variety of common figures of speech make English difficult to learn as a foreign language, but also make it fertile ground for creative writing. (Notice that *fertile ground* here is a trope, specifically a metaphor in which the language is compared to soil.)

There are many different kinds of figures of speech, but the five major tropes are usually considered to be:

- **Metonymy**, in which one thing is represented by another thing associated with it, as in *all the crowns of Europe* (where *crowns* stands for *kings*)
- **Synecdoche**, in which a part stands for the whole, as in *all hands on deck* (where *hands* stands for *men*)
- **Personification**, in which human characteristics are bestowed on anything nonhuman, as in *the breathing city* or *the gentle breeze*
- **Metaphor**, a comparison as in *the woman is a rose*
- **Simile**, a comparison as in *the woman is like a rose*

Though these are five of the most frequently used figures of speech in English, you may be familiar with others, such as **hyperbole**, which is extreme exaggeration, and **oxymoron**, which links two contradictory words. And who hasn't enjoyed groaning at a **pun**? In medieval and Renaissance rhetoric, dozens of such tropes were identified, classified, and debated, and skill in using these "ornaments" much admired.

The rhetorical debate has lost its urgency, but the use of figurative language in literature retains its force, slightly turning or twisting the reader's

perspective to offer a new or unusual view of the familiar. When Todd McEwen—in the memoir of his sister, "A Very Young Dancer"—says that her suitor, "Jay, suddenly tired of Moira's perpetual mystery, announced, *The wallet is closed,*" he (and Jay) are using a metonymy in which the wallet stands for love and indulgence. If a fictional narrator observes, "Rub two guilts together and they burst into blame," she is personifying the abstractions *guilt* and *blame* with ironic reference to the notion of rubbing sticks together. If a poems begins:

> I keep stepping on the ugly nap
> Of all our local comings and disappearings...

The "nap" is a synecdoche for the more obvious word *carpet,* and moves our focus inward, toward a detail or close-up. It is said of filmmaking that "every close-up is synecdoche," meaning that when, for example, we see a close-up of a hand, we assume that it stands for the whole person. If we see that hand go limp, it may be metonymy suggesting that person's death.

Of all the possible figures of speech to be used by the poet, the playwright, the essayist, and the story writer, metaphor and simile are the most common and the most crucial. A *metaphor* assumes or states a comparison, without acknowledging that it is a comparison: *my electric muscles shock the crowd; her hair is seaweed and she is the sea.* The metaphor may come in the form of an adjective: *they have a piggy and a fishy air.* Or it may come as a verb: *the bees shouldering the grass.*

A simile makes a comparison between two things using the words *like* or *as*: *his teeth rattled like dice in a box; my head is light as a balloon; I will fall like an ocean on that court!*

Both metaphor and simile compare things that are both alike and different, and it is in the tension between this likeness and difference that their literary power lies.

From earliest infancy, our brains are busy registering likeness and difference. This is a major way we learn, about both behavior and what things mean. A smile on Mother's face expresses and promises pleasure, so a smile on a different face also reassures us. If we fall and are told to "be careful," then "be careful" will suggest alarm when we reach for the glass of milk. We compare an experience in the past to a current problem in order to predict the future. The habit of comparison is so natural that our language is full of metaphor and simile we use without knowing we are doing so. *Don't split a gut. Let's go for all the marbles. It doesn't compute. That went belly up. He lays it on with a trowel. I'm fed to the teeth. Read my lips.* Many popular metaphors, such as these, are reused until they become *clichés,* comparisons that have lost their freshness.

Metaphor is central to imaginative writing because it offers a particularly exact and resonant kind of concrete detail. When we speak of "the eyes of

a potato," or "the eye of the needle," we mean simply that the leaf bud and the thread hole *look like eyes*. We don't mean to suggest that the potato or the needle can see. The comparisons do not suggest any essential or abstract quality to do with sight.

But in literature both metaphor and simile have developed so that the resonance of comparison is precisely in the essential or abstract quality that the two objects share. When a writer speaks of "the eyes of the houses" or "the windows of the soul," the comparison of eyes to windows does contain the idea of transmitting vision between the inner and the outer. When Shakespeare's Jacques claims that "all the world's a stage," the significance lies not in the physical similarity of the world to a stage (he isn't backtracking in history to claim the world is flat) but in the essential qualities that such similarity implies: the pretense of the actors, the briefness of the play, the parts that men and women must inevitably play from babyhood to old age.

A metaphor presents us with a comparison that also conveys an abstraction or a judgment. A good metaphor resonates with the essential, and this is the writer's principle of choice. So Peter Hoeg, in *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, speaks of rain showers that "slap me in the face with a wet towel." Well, rain showers can patter gently on your face, or dribble down your neck, or bring May flowers. But the rain showers that Hoeg is talking about have a vicious nature that lies in the metaphor: They hit hard, they sting, and they seem to hurt on purpose.

Hoeg's metaphor contains a complex of meanings; yet it is *brief*. Because a metaphor condenses so many connotations into the tension between the images, it tends to be not only concrete but concise. So although you might in one context choose to say, "He was so angry that I thought he was going to hit me," if you sense that the moment wants the special intensity of metaphor, you could also pack that meaning into "His face was a fist."

A metaphor is a particular and particularly imaginative kind of significant detail comparing two sensible images and letting the abstraction remain unvoiced between them. But even if part of the comparison is an abstraction, that part will be made vivid by the "thingness" of the comparison. Robert Frost's famous "Fire and Ice" develops a simple but striking metaphor in which the objects are compared to the qualities themselves:

> Some say the world will end in fire,
> Some say in ice.
> From what I've tasted of desire
> I hold with those who favor fire.
> But if it had to perish twice,
> I think I know enough of hate
> To say that for destruction ice
> Is also great
> And would suffice.

TRY THIS 2.5

Write this poem: The first line consists of an abstraction, plus a verb, plus a place. The second line describes attire. The third line summarizes an action. Let it flow; don't worry too much about making sense.

Examples (by Carissa Neff)

Beauty creeps out the window
Wearing nothing but taut bare skin.
Leaving a trail of wrinkles behind her.

Hunger yells in the hallway,
Draped in cymbals;
He stomps and shouts, "Hear me now!"

The major danger of metaphor is **cliché**. Those "windows of the soul," those "eyes like pools" are so familiar that they no longer hold any interest, whereas a fresh metaphor surprises us with the unlikeness of the two things compared while at the same time convincing us of the aptness or truth of the likeness. A clichéd metaphor fails to surprise us and so fails to illuminate. Sometimes as a writer you will find yourself with a gift of fresh comparison, and sometimes the first image that comes to mind will be tired and stale. All writers experience this, and the good ones learn to overcome it. The first thing to do is to make yourself alert to clichés in your own writing and the world around you, and then to labor (which may mean to dream) your way toward those images that illuminate the everyday and make the familiar strange.

TRY THIS 2.6

Quickly list as many clichéd metaphors as you can think of: *the path of life, eyes like pools, crazy as a bedbug, nose to the grindstone,* and so forth. Then switch half a dozen of the comparisons: *eyes like bedbugs, nose to the path, the grindstone of life.* Some of these might be fresh and apt! In any case, the exercise will help you become aware of clichés and so help you avoid them.

My own long relationship with cliché is a paradox, for I find that my language is least fresh when I am most determined to write well. If I sit rigid with good intentions, my inner critic takes up residence on my shoulder, sneering *that's silly, that's far-fetched, what a crock, nobody'll believe that!*—with the result that I fall back on usual phrases. But if I knock her off her perch and let myself try anything that comes to mind, *some* of it will be silly, some far-fetched, and among the verbal rubble there is almost bound to be a salvageable building block, a serviceable cooking pot, a precious stone.

More to Read

Rico, Gabriele Lusser. *Writing the Natural Way*. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, Inc., 1983. Print.

READINGS

The readings that follow employ imagery and metaphor in a wide variety of ways. For example, Annie Dillard's "*from* Heaven and Earth in Jest," a short essay from her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, represents a single, sharp observation of nature, dense with metaphor. David Sedaris's "Standing By" exposes bad-tempered travelers visibly, audibly, and ultimately in one succinct image.

Read each selection once, fast, for content and pleasure; then a second time consciously aware of images and metaphors. What effect do they have on you? How? What technique might you imitate, absorb, try, steal?

Among the readings you'll find some triggers for play in your journal. These are not connected to the readings in any direct or literal way but may suggest peripheral ways to practice some shape, subject, or skill the writers display. At the end of this and further chapters you will find suggestions for developing your ideas toward a draft of a finished piece.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

ANNIE DILLARD

from Heaven and Earth in Jest

A couple of summers ago I was walking along the edge of the island to see what I could see in the water, and mainly to scare frogs. Frogs have an inelegant way of taking off from invisible positions on the bank just ahead of your feet, in dire panic, emitting a froggy "Yike!" and splashing into the water. Incredibly, this amused me, and, incredibly, it amuses me still. As I walked along the grassy edge of the island, I got better and better at seeing frogs both in and out of the water. I learned to recognize, slowing down, the difference in texture of the light reflected from mudbank, water, grass, or frog. Frogs were flying all around me. At the end of the island I noticed a small green frog. He was exactly half in and half out of the water, looking like a schematic diagram of an amphibian, and he didn't jump.

He didn't jump; I crept closer. At last I knelt on the island's winter-killed grass, lost, dumb-struck, staring at the frog in the creek just four feet away. He was a very small frog with wide, dull eyes. And just as I looked at him, he slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed. His skin emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a kicked tent. He was shrinking before my eyes like a deflating football. I watched the taut, glistening skin on his shoulders ruck and rumple and fall. Soon, part of his skin, formless as a pricked balloon, lay in floating folds like bright scum on top of the water: it was a monstrous and terrifying thing.

I gaped bewildered, appalled. An oval shadow hung in the water behind the drained frog; then the shadow glided away. The frog skin bag started to sink.

I had read about the giant water bug, but never seen one. "Giant water bug" is really the name of the creature, which is an enormous, heavy-bodied brown beetle. It eats insects, tadpoles, fish, and frogs. Its grasping forelegs are mighty and hooked inward. It seizes a victim with these legs, hugs it tight, and paralyzes it with enzymes injected during a vicious bite. That one bite is the only bite it ever takes. Through the puncture shoot the poisons that dissolve the victim's muscles and bones and organs—all but the skin—and through it the giant water bug sucks out the victim's body, reduced to a juice. This event is quite common in warm fresh water. The frog I saw was being sucked by a giant water bug. I had been kneeling on the island grass; when the unrecognizable flap of frog skin settled on the creek bottom, swaying, I stood up and brushed the knees of my pants. I couldn't catch my breath.

DAVID SEDARIS

Standing By

It was one of those headaches that befall every airline passenger. A flight is delayed because of thunderstorms or backed-up traffic—or maybe it's cancelled altogether. Maybe you board two hours late, or maybe you board on time, and spend the next two hours sitting on the runway. When it happens to you, it's a national tragedy—why aren't the papers reporting this, you wonder.

Only when it happens to someone else do you realize what a dull story it really is. "They told us we'd leave at three instead of two-thirty, so I went to get a frosted-pecan wrap, and when I came back they changed the time to four, on account of the plane we'd be riding on hadn't left Pittsburgh yet. Then I was, like, 'Why didn't you tell us that an hour ago?,' and they were, like, 'Ma'am, just stand away from the counter, please.'"

Because I'm in the air so often, I hear this sort of thing a lot. In line for a coffee. In line for a newspaper or a gunpowder test on the handle of my public-radio tote bag: everywhere I go, someone in an eight-dollar T-shirt is whipping out a cell phone and delivering the fine print of his or her delay. One can't help but listen in, but then my focus shifts and I find myself staring. I should be used to the way Americans dress when travelling, yet still it manages to amaze me. It's as if the person next to you had been washing shoe polish off a pig, then suddenly threw down his sponge, saying, "Fuck this. I'm going to Los Angeles!"

On Halloween, when I see the ticket agents dressed as hags and mummies, I no longer think, Nice costume, but, Now we have to tag our own luggage?

I mean that I mistake *them* for *us*.

The scariness, of course, cuts both ways. I was on a plane in the spring of 2003 when the flight attendant asked us to pray for our troops in Iraq. It was a prickly time, but, brand-new war or no brand-new war, you don't ever want to hear the word "pray" from a flight attendant.

You don't want to hear the phrase "I'll be right back," either. That's code for "Go fuck yourself," according to a woman who used to fly for Northwest and taught me several terms specific to her profession.

"You know how a plastic bottle of water will get all crinkly during a flight?" she asked. 'Well, it happens to people, too, to our insides. That's why we get all gassy."

"All right," I said.

10 "So what me and the other gals would sometimes do is fart while we walked up and down the aisle. No one could hear it on account of the engine noise, but, anyway, that's what we called 'crop dusting.'"

When I asked another flight attendant, this one male, how he dealt with a plane full of belligerent passengers, he said, "Oh, we have our ways. The next time you're flying and it comes time to land, listen closely as we make our final pass down the aisle."

In the summer of 2009, I was trying to get from North Dakota to Oregon. There were thunderstorms in Colorado, so we were two hours late leaving Fargo. This caused me to miss my connecting flight, and upon my arrival in Denver I was directed to the customer-service line. It was a long one—thirty, maybe thirty-five people, all of them cranky and exhausted. In front of me stood a woman in her mid-seventies, accompanying two beautifully dressed children, a boy and a girl. "The airlines complain that nobody's travelling, and then you arrive to find your flight's been oversold!" the woman griped. "I'm trying to get me and my grand-kids to San Francisco, and now they're telling us there's nothing until tomorrow afternoon."

At this, her cell phone rang. The woman raised it to her ear and a great many silver bracelets clattered down her arm. "Frank? Is that you? What did you find out?"

The person on the other end fed her information, and as she struggled to open her pocketbook I held out my pad and pen. "A nice young man just gave me something to write with, so go ahead," the woman said. "I'm ready." Then she said, "*What?* Well, *I* could have told you that." She handed me back my pad and pen, and, rolling her eyes, whispered, "Thanks anyway." After hanging up, she turned to the kids, "Your old grandmother is so sorry for putting you through this. But she's going to make it up to you, she swears."

15 They were like children from a catalogue. The little girl's skirt was a red-and-white check, and matched the ribbon that banded her straw hat. Her brother was wearing a shirt and tie. It was a clip-on, but, still, it made him

and his sister the best-dressed people in line, much better than the family ten or so places ahead of them. That group consisted of a couple in their mid-fifties and three teen-agers, two of whom were obviously brothers. The third teen-ager, a girl, was holding a very young baby. I suppose it could have been a loaner, but the way she engaged with it—the obvious pride and pleasure she was radiating—led me to believe that the child was hers. Its father, I guessed, was the kid standing next to her, the taller and more visually dynamic of the brothers. The young man's hair was almost orange, and drooped from his head in thin, lank braids. At the end of each one, just above the rubber band, was a colored bead the size of a marble. Stevie Wonder wore his hair like that in the late seventies, but he's black. And blind. Then, too, Stevie Wonder didn't have acne on his neck, and wear baggy denim shorts that fell midway between his knees and his ankles. Topping it off was the kid's T-shirt. I couldn't see the front of it, but printed in large letters across the back were the words "Freaky Mothafocka."

I didn't know where to start with that one. Let's see, I'm flying on a plane with my parents and my infant son, so should I wear the T-shirt that says "Orgasm Donor," "I'm No Gynecologist but I'm Willing to Take a Look," or, no, seeing as I'll have the beaded cornrows, I think I should go with "Freaky Mothafocka."

As the kid reached over and took the baby from the teen-age girl, the woman in front of me winced. "Typical," she groaned.

"I beg your pardon."

She gestured toward the Freaky Mothafocka. "The only ones *having* babies are the ones who *shouldn't* be having them." Her gaze shifted to the adults. "And look at the stupid grandparents, proud as punch."

It was one of those situations I often find myself in while travelling. 20
Something's said by a stranger I've been randomly thrown into contact with, and I want to say, "Listen. I'm with you on most of this, but before we continue I need to know whom you voted for in the last election."

If the grandmother's criticism was coming from the same place as mine, if she was just being petty and judgmental, we could go on all day, perhaps even form a friendship. If, on the other hand, it was tied to a conservative agenda, I was going to have to switch tracks, and side with the Freaky Mothafocka, who was, after all, just a kid. He may have looked like a Dr. Seuss character, but that didn't mean he couldn't love his baby—a baby, I told myself, who just might grow up to be a Supreme Court Justice, or the President of the United States. Or, at least, I don't know, someone with a job.

Of course, you can't just *ask* people whom they voted for. Sometimes you can tell by looking, but the grandmother with the many bracelets could have gone either way. In the end, I decided to walk the center line. "What gets me is that they couldn't even spell 'motherfucker' right," I whispered. "I mean, what kind of example is that setting for our young people?"

After that, she didn't want to talk anymore, not even when the line advanced, and Mothafocka and company moved to one of the counter positions. Including the baby, there were six in their party, so I knew it was going to take forever. Where do they need to go, anyway? I asked myself. Wherever it is, would it have killed them to drive?

Fly enough, and you learn to go braindead when you have to. It's sort of like time travel. One minute you're bending to unlace your shoes, and the next thing you know you're paying fourteen dollars for a fruit cup, wondering, How did I get here?

No sooner had I alienated the grandmother in Denver than I was trapped by the man behind me, who caught my eye and, without invitation, proceeded to complain. He had been passed over for a standby seat earlier that morning and was not happy about it. "The gal at the gate said she'd call my name when it came time to board, but, hell, she didn't call me."

I tried to look sympathetic.

"I should have taken her name," the man continued. "I should have reported her. Hell, I should have punched her is what I should have done!"

"I hear you," I said.

Directly behind him was a bald guy with a silver mustache, one of those elaborate jobs which wanders awhile before eventually morphing into sideburns. The thing was as curved and bushy as a squirrel's tail, and the man shook crumbs from it as the fellow who'd lost his standby seat turned to engage him.

"Goddam airline. It's no wonder they're all going down the toilet."

"None of them want to work, that's the problem," the bald man with the mustache said. "All any of them care about is their next goddam coffee break." He looked at the counter agents with disdain, and then turned his eye on the Freaky Mothafocka. "And that one must be heading back to the circus."

"Pathetic," the man behind me said. He himself was wearing pleated khaki shorts and a blue T-shirt. A baseball cap hung from his waistband, and his sneakers, which were white, appeared to be brand new. Like a lot of men you see these days, he looked like a boy, suddenly, shockingly, set into an adult body. "We got a kid looks like him back in the town I come from, and every time I see him I just thank God he isn't mine."

As the two started in on rap music and baggy trousers, I zoned out, and thought about my last layover in Denver. I was on the people mover, jogging toward my connection at the end of Concourse C, when the voice over the P.A. system asked Adolf Hitler to pick up a white courtesy phone. Did I hear that correctly? I remember thinking. It's hard to imagine anyone calling their son Adolf Hitler, so the person must have changed it from something less provocative, a category that includes pretty much everything. Weirder still was hearing the name in the same sentence as the word "courtesy." I imagined a man picking up the receiver, his voice made soft by surprise, and the possibility of bad news. "Yes, hello, this is Adolf Hitler."

Thinking of it made me laugh, and that brought me back to the present, and the fellow behind me in the khaki shorts. "Isn't it amazing how quickly one man can completely screw up a country," he was saying.

"You got that right," Mr. Mustache agreed. "It's a goddam mess is what it is." 35

I assumed they were talking about George Bush but gradually realized it was Barack Obama, who had, at that point, been in office for less than six months.

The man with the mustache mentioned a G.M. dealership in his home town. "They were doing fine, but now the federal government's telling them they have to close. Like this is Russia or something, a Communist country!"

The man in the khaki shorts joined in, and I wished I'd paid closer attention to the auto-bailout stuff. It had been on the radio and in all the papers, but because I don't drive, and I always thought that car dealerships were ugly, I'd either turned the page or let my mind wander, which was unfortunate, as I'd have loved to have turned around and given those two what for. Then again, even if I were informed, what's the likelihood of changing anyone's opinion, especially a couple of strangers'? If my own little mind is nailed shut, why wouldn't theirs be?

"We've got to take our country back," the man with the mustache said. "That's the long and short of it, and if votes won't do the trick then maybe we need to use force."

What struck me with him, and with many of the conservatives I'd heard since the election, was his overblown, almost egocentric take on political outrage, his certainty that no one else had quite experienced it before. What, then, had I felt during the Bush-Cheney years? Was that somehow secondary? "Don't tell me I don't know how to hate," I wanted to say. Then I stopped and asked myself, Do you really want *that* to be your message? *Think you can out-hate me, asshole? I was fucking hating people before you were even born!* 40

We're forever blaming the airline industry for turning us into monsters: it's the fault of the ticket agents, the baggage handlers, the slowpokes at the newsstands and the fast-food restaurants. But what if this is who we truly are, and the airport's just a forum that allows us to be our real selves, not just hateful but gloriously so?

Would Adolf Hitler please meet his party at Baggage Claim 4. Repeat, Adolf Hitler can meet his party at Baggage Claim 4.

It's a depressing thought, and one that proved hard to shake. It was with me when I boarded my flight to Portland and it was still on my mind several hours later, when we were told to put our tray tables away and prepare for landing. Then the flight attendants, garbage bags in hand, glided down the aisle, looking each one of us square in the face and whispering, without discrimination, "Your trash. You're trash. Your family's trash."

TRY THIS 2.7
Write, quickly, a page or two about a bad travel experience you have had. Make yourself a part of the problem (through the way you look, talk, smell...).

FICTION

TOBIAS WOLFF

Bullet in the Brain

Anders couldn't get to the bank until just before it closed, so of course the line was endless and he got stuck behind two women whose loud, stupid conversation put him in a murderous temper. He was never in the best of tempers anyway, Anders—a book critic known for the weary, elegant savagery with which he dispatched almost everything he reviewed.

With the line still doubled around the rope, one of the tellers stuck a "POSITION CLOSED" sign in her window and walked to the back of the bank, where she leaned against a desk and began to pass the time with a man shuffling papers. The women in front of Anders broke off their conversation and watched the teller with hatred. "Oh, that's nice," one of them said. She turned to Anders and added, confident of his accord, "One of those little human touches that keep us coming back for more."

Anders had conceived his own towering hatred of the teller, but he immediately turned it on the presumptuous crybaby in front of him. "Damned unfair," he said, "Tragic, really. If they're not chopping off the wrong leg, or bombing your ancestral village, they're closing their positions."

She stood her ground. "I didn't say it was tragic," she said, "I just think it's a pretty lousy way to treat your customers."

5 "Unforgivable," Anders said. "Heaven will take note."

She sucked in her cheeks but stared past him and said nothing. Anders saw that the other woman, her friend, was looking in the same direction. And then the tellers stopped what they were doing, and the customers slowly turned, and silence came over the bank. Two men wearing black ski masks and blue business suits were standing to the side of the door. One of them had a pistol pressed against the guard's neck. The guard's eyes were closed, and his lips were moving. The other man had a sawed-off shotgun. "Keep your big mouth shut!" the man with the pistol said, though no one had spoken a word. "One of you tellers hits the alarm, you're all dead meat. Got it?"

The tellers nodded.

"Oh, bravo," Anders said. *"Dead meat."* He turned to the woman in front of him. "Great script, eh? The stern, brass-knuckled poetry of the dangerous classes."

She looked at him with drowning eyes.

The man with the shotgun pushed the guard to his knees. He handed the shotgun to his partner and yanked the guard's wrists up behind his back and locked them together with a pair of handcuffs. He toppled him onto the floor with a kick between the shoulder blades. Then he took his shotgun back and went over to the security gate at the end of the counter. He was short and heavy and moved with peculiar slowness, even torpor. "Buzz him in," his partner said. The man with the shotgun opened the gate and sauntered along the line of tellers, handing each of them a Hefty bag. When he came to the empty position he looked over at the man with the pistol, who said, "Whose slot is that?"

Anders watched the teller. She put her hand to her throat and turned to the man she'd been talking to. He nodded. "Mine," she said.

"Then get your ugly ass in gear and fill that bag."

"There you go," Anders said to the woman in front of him. "Justice is done."

"Hey! Bright boy! Did I tell you to talk?"

"No," Anders said.

"Then shut your trap."

"Did you hear that?" Anders said. "'Bright boy.' Right out of 'The Killers.'"

"Please be quiet," the woman said.

"Hey, you deaf or what?" The man with the pistol walked over to Anders. He poked the weapon into Anders' gut. "You think I'm playing games?"

"No," Anders said, but the barrel tickled like a stiff finger and he had to fight back the titters. He did this by making himself stare into the man's eyes, which were clearly visible behind the holes in the mask: pale blue and rawly red-rimmed. The man's left eyelid kept twitching. He breathed out a piercing, ammoniac smell that shocked Anders more than anything that had happened, and he was beginning to develop a sense of unease when the man prodded him again with the pistol.

"You like me, bright boy!" he said. "You want to suck my dick!"

"No," Anders said.

"Then stop looking at me."

Anders fixed his gaze on the man's shiny wing-tip shoes.

"Not down there. Up there." He stuck the pistol under Anders' chin and pushed it upward until Anders was looking at the ceiling.

Anders had never paid much attention to that part of the bank, a pompous old building with marble floors and counters and pillars, and gilt scrollwork over the tellers' cages. The domed ceiling had been decorated with mythological figures whose fleshy, toga-draped ugliness Anders had taken in at a glance many years earlier and afterward declined to notice. Now he had no choice but to scrutinize the painter's work. It was even worse than he remembered, and all of it executed with the utmost gravity. The artist had a

few tricks up his sleeve and used them again and again—a certain rosy blush on the underside of the clouds, a coy backward glance on the faces of the cupids and fauns. The ceiling was crowded with various dramas, but the one that caught Anders' eye was Zeus and Europa—portrayed, in this rendition, as a bull ogling a cow from behind a haystack. To make the cow sexy, the painter had canted her hips suggestively and given her long, droopy eyelashes through which she gazed back at the bull with sultry welcome. The bull wore a smirk and his eyebrows were arched. If there'd been a bubble coming out of his mouth, it would have said, "Hubba hubba."

"What's so funny, bright boy?"

"Nothing."

"You think I'm comical? You think I'm some kind of clown?"

"No."

"You think you can fuck with me?"

"No."

"Fuck with me again, you're history. *Capiche?*"

Anders burst out laughing. He covered his mouth with both hands and said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," then snorted helplessly through his fingers and said, "*Capiche*—oh, God, *capiche*," and at that the man with the pistol raised the pistol and shot Anders right in the head.

The bullet smashed Anders' skull and ploughed through his brain and exited behind his right ear, scattering shards of bone into the cerebral cortex, the corpus callosum, back toward the basal ganglia, and down into the thalamus. But before all this occurred, the first appearance of the bullet in the cerebrum set off a crackling chain of iron transports and neuro-transmissions. Because of their peculiar origin these traced a peculiar pattern, flukishly calling to life a summer afternoon some forty years past, and long since lost to memory. After striking the cranium the bullet was moving at 900 feet per second, a pathetically sluggish, glacial pace compared to the synaptic lightning that flashed around it. Once in the brain, that is, the bullet came under the mediation of brain time, which gave Anders plenty of leisure to contemplate the scene that, in a phrase he would have abhorred, "passed before his eyes."

It is worth noting what Anders did not remember, given what he did remember. He did not remember his first lover, Sherry, or what he had most madly loved about her, before it came to irritate him—her unembarrassed carnality, and especially the cordial way she had with his unit, which she called Mr. Mole, as in, "Uh-oh, looks like Mr. Mole wants to play," and, "let's hide Mr. Mole!" Anders did not remember his wife, whom he had also loved before she exhausted him with her predictability, or his daughter, now a sullen professor of economics at Dartmouth. He did not remember standing just outside his daughter's door as she lectured her bear about his naughtiness and described the truly appalling punishments Paws would receive unless he changed his ways. He did not remember a single line of the hundreds

of poems he had committed to memory in his youth so that he could give himself the shivers at will—not "Silent, upon a peak in Darien," or "My God, I heard this day," or "All my pretty ones? Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?" None of these did he remember; not one. Anders did not remember his dying mother saying of his father, "I should have stabbed him in his sleep."

He did not remember Professor Josephs telling his class how Athenian prisoners in Sicily had been released if they could recite Aeschylus, and then reciting Aeschylus himself, right there, in the Greek. Anders did not remember how his eyes had burned at those sounds. He did not remember the surprise of seeing a college classmate's name on the jacket of a novel not long after they graduated, or the respect he had felt after reading the book. He did not remember the pleasure of giving respect.

Nor did Anders remember seeing a woman leap to her death from the building opposite his own just days after his daughter was born. He did not remember shouting, "Lord have mercy!" He did not remember deliberately crashing his father's car into a tree, or having his ribs kicked in by three policemen at an anti-war rally, or waking himself up with laughter. He did not remember when he began to regard the heap of books on his desk with boredom and dread, or when he grew angry at writers for writing them. He did not remember when everything began to remind him of something else.

This is what he remembered. Heat. A baseball field. Yellow grass, the whirr of insects, himself leaning against a tree as the boys of the neighborhood gather for a pickup game. He looks on as the others argue the relative genius of Mantle and Mays. They have been worrying this subject all summer, and it has become tedious to Anders; an oppression, like the heat.

Then the last two boys arrive, Coyle and a cousin of his from Mississippi. 40
Anders has never met Coyle's cousin before and will never see him again. He says hi with the rest but takes no further notice of him until they've chosen sides and someone asks the cousin what position he wants to play. "Shortstop," the boy says. "Short's the best position they is." Anders turns and looks at him. He wants to hear Coyle's cousin repeat what he's just said, but he knows better than to ask. The others will think he's being a jerk, ragging the kid for his grammar. But that isn't it, not at all—it's that Anders is strangely roused, elated, by those final two words, their pure unexpectedness and their music. He takes the field in a trance, repeating them to himself.

The bullet is already in the brain; it won't be outrun forever, or charmed to a halt. In the end it will do its work and leave the troubled skull behind, dragging its comet's tail of memory and hope and talent and love into the marble hall of commerce. That can't be helped. But for now Anders can still make time. Time for the shadows to lengthen on the grass, time for the tethered dog to bark at the flying ball, time for the boy in right field to smack his sweat-blackened mitt and softly chant, *They is, they is, they is.*

TRY THIS 2.8
Describe someone entirely in negatives: what he or she does not do, does not look like, does not remember; how he or she does not dress, walk, sound, or the like. Can you make us know who the character is?

JAMAICA KINCAID

Girl

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk barehead in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little cloths right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn't have gum on it, because that way it won't hold up well after a wash; soak salt fish overnight before you cook it; is it true that you sing benna in Sunday school?; always eat your food in such a way that it won't turn someone else's stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don't sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn't speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don't eat fruits on the street—flies will follow you; *but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school*; this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father's khaki shirt so that it doesn't have a crease; this is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease; this is how you grow okra—far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing dasheen, make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don't squat down to play marbles—you are not a boy, you know; don't pick people's flowers—you might catch something; don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might

not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make a bread pudding; this is how to make doukona; this is how to make pepper pot; this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw back a fish you don't like, and that way something bad won't fall on you; this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man, and if this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up; this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn't fall on you; this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; *but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?

TRY THIS 2.9
Let one character scold another with a list of specific complaints.

POEMS

ROGER BONAIR-AGARD

American History looks for light—a prayer for the survival of Barack Obama

... Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee
the hands can't touch what the eyes can't see...
Muhammed Ali

(i) *the bullet speaks of purpose*

Trajectory is everything
the difference between a kiss off
the ribcage or the blessed blood
of a ripe organ The brain
protests the most neurons
firing over and around the holy
landing trying to make sense
of it the wailing and the vivid
snapshots metal tendrils reaching
trying to block out the light

(ii) *Malcolm pulls Obama's coat*

there is no doubt
in my mind they will come for you
dozens at a time
miniature fighter planes built
for such an idealism as yours
They are amazing fish
fanning their steel gills
like razors their fins peeling back
formations neat and orderly as a school
barreling toward the abdomen
heart spleen kidney anywhere
there is light

(iii) *Obama plays the dozens*

I'm so fast I'll be gone by trigger time
I'm so bad I beat Hillary by 30
I'm so slick not even Bill could sink me
I'm so badass my name is Barack
I'm so chameleon my name is Hussein
I'm so pretty your Mama canvassed for me
I'm so pretty your Mama voted for me
I'm so pretty your Mama is my Mama
I'm so good I shook up the world
I'm so fast I dodged a circus of bullets
I'm so fast I take off the switch and be in bed
before the light comes off

(iv) *the bullet takes the bait*

Neither disease nor plane crash
not knife or hurricane or freak accident
is as dramatic as me
See the body begin the decompose
in an instant See the body
become particular See
the body become tendrils
of impressionist thought See how
marvellous my entrances
how devastating my exit wounds
I save my best work for the stage.

(v) *Bruce Lee knows from bullets*

See this fist
this quick a capella kick
kung fu sho nuff
what see this
sidestep Tae Kwon Don't
you never think steel is hard
as bone - Barack I legacy you
Me - every dragon flow
strict mantis pose
struck to cobra swift release

Don't you never think
steel is hard as home
See this river flow bones
see how bullets bury
what they can't kill
See how i live
ecstatic - fly jumpsuit
dramatic - Barack I legacy you
Me - like i loaned Muhammed
the butterfly and the bee we stay
vested - historically protected B
We battle terrific Fuck Chuck Norris
me and Jim Kelly's got your hood
and your dome Don't you never
think steel be hard like stone

BILLY COLLINS

Snow Day

Today we woke up to a revolution of snow,
its white flag waving over everything,
the landscape vanished,
not a single mouse to punctuate the blankness,
and beyond these windows

the government buildings smothered,
schools and libraries buried, the post office lost
under the noiseless drift,

the paths of trains softly blocked,
the world fallen under this falling.

In a while, I will put on some boots
and step out like someone walking in water,
and the dog will porpoise through the drifts,
and I will shake a laden branch
sending a cold shower down on us both.

But for now I am a willing prisoner in this house,
a sympathizer with the anarchic cause of snow.
I will make a pot of tea
and listen to the plastic radio on the counter,
as glad as anyone to hear the news

that the Kiddie Corner School is closed,
the Ding-Dong School, closed,
the All Aboard Children's School, closed,
the Hi-Ho Nursery School, closed,
along with—some will be delighted to hear—

the Toadstool School, the Little School,
Little Sparrows Nursery School,
Little Stars Pre-School, Peas-and-Carrots Day School
the Tom Thumb Child Center, all closed,
and—clap your hands—the Peanuts Play School.

So this is where the children hide all day,
these are the nests where they letter and draw,
where they put on their bright miniature jackets,
all darting and climbing and sliding,
all but the few girls whispering by the fence.

And now I am listening hard
in the grandiose silence of the snow,
trying to hear what those three girls are plotting,
what riot is afoot,
which small queen is about to be brought down.

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA

Facing It

My black face fades,
hiding inside the black granite.
I said I wouldn't,

dammit: No tears.
I'm stone. I'm flesh.
My clouded reflection eyes me
like a bird of prey, the profile of night
slanted against morning. I turn
this way—the stone lets me go.
I turn that way—I'm inside
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
again, depending on the light
to make a difference.
I go down the 58,022 names,
half-expecting to find
my own in letters like smoke.
I touch the name Andrew Johnson;
I see the booby trap's white flash.
Names shimmer on a woman's blouse
but when she walks away
the names stay on the wall.
Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's
wings cutting across my stare.
The sky. A plane in the sky.
A white vet's image floats
closer to me, then his pale eyes
look through mine. I'm a window.
He's lost his right arm
inside the stone. In the black mirror
a woman's trying to erase names:
No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

TRY THIS 2.10

Write a paragraph or a poem exploring your relationship with an animal or a machine. Describe the animal or machine using at least three of the senses.

Or:

Write a poem or paragraph about a relationship between surface and depth—in an eye, a mirror, water, metal…

JANE MARTIN

French Fries

An old woman in a straight-back chair holding a McDonald's cup. She is surrounded by several bundles of newspapers. She wears thick glasses that distort her eyes to the viewer.

ANNA MAE: If I had one wish in my life, why I'd like to live in McDonald's. Right there in the restaurant. 'Stead of in this old place. I'll come up to the brow of the hill, bowed down with my troubles, hurtin' under my load and I'll see that yellow horseshoe, sort of like part of a rainbow, and it gives my old spirit a lift. Lord, I can sit in a McDonald's all day. I've done it too. Walked the seven miles with the sun just on its way, and then sat on the curb till five minutes of seven. First one there and the last one to leave. Just like some ol' french fry they forgot.

I like the young people workin' there. Like a team of fine young horses when I was growin' up. All smilin'. Tell you what I really like though is the plastic. God gave us plastic so there wouldn't be no stains on his world. See, in the human world of the earth it all gets scratched, stained, tore up, faded down. Loses its shine. All of it does. In time. Well, God he gave us the idea of plastic so we'd know what the everlasting really was. See if there's plastic then there's surely eternity. It's God's hint.

You ever watch folks when they come on in the McDonald's? They always speed up, almost run the last few steps. You see if they don't. Old Dobbin with the barn in sight. They know it's safe in there and it ain't safe outside. Now it ain't safe outside and you know it.

I've seen a man healed by a Big Mac. I have. I was just sittin' there. Last summer it was. Oh, they don't never move you on. It's a sacred law in McDonald's, you can sit for a hundred years. Only place in this world. Anyway, a fella, maybe thirty-five, maybe forty, come on in there dressed real nice, real bright tie, bran' new baseball cap, nice white socks and he had him that disease. You know the one I mean, Cerebral Walrus they call it. Anyway, he had him a cock leg. His poor old body had it two speeds at the same time. Now he got him some coffee, with a lid on, and sat him down and Jimmy the tow-head cook knew him, see, and he brought over a Big Mac. Well, the sick fella ate maybe half of it and then he was just sittin', you know, suffering those tremors, when a couple of *ants* come right out of the burger. Now there ain't no ants in McDonald's no way. Lord sent those ants, and the sick fella he looked real sharp at the burger and a bunch *more* ants marched on out nice as you please and his head lolled right over and he pitched himself out of that chair and banged

his head on the floor, loud. Thwack! Like a bowling ball dropping. Made you half sick to hear it. We jump up and run over but he was cold out. Well those servin' kids, so cute, they watered him, stuck a touch pepper up his nostril, slapped him right smart, and bang, up he got. Standin' an' blinkin'. 'Well, how are you?,' we say. An he looks us over, looks right in our eyes, and he say, 'I'm fine.' And he was. He was fine! Tipped his Cincinnati Reds baseball cap, big 'jus'-swallowed-the-canary' grin, paraded out of there clean, straight like a pole-bean poplar, walked him a plumb line without no trace of the 'walrus.' Got outside, jumped up, whooped, hollered, sang him the National Anthem, flagged down a Circle Line bus, an' rode off up Muhammad Ali Boulevard wavin' an' smilin' like the King of the Pharoahs. Healed by a Big Mac. I saw it.

McDonald's. You ever seen anybody die in a McDonald's? No sir. No way. Nobody ever has died in one. Shoot, they die in Burger Kings all the time. Kentucky Fried Chicken's got their own damn ambulances. Nooooooooooo, you can't die in a McDonald's no matter how hard you try. It's the spices. Seals you safe in this life like it seals in the flavor. Yesssssssss, yes!

I asked Jarrell could I live there. See they close up around ten, and there ain't a thing goin' on in 'em till seven a.m. I'd just sit in those nice swingy chairs and lean forward. Rest my head on those cool, cool, smooth tables, sing me a hymn and sleep like a baby. Jarrell, he said he'd write him a letter up the chain of command and see would they let me. Oh, I got my bid in. Peaceful and clean.

Sometimes I see it like the last of a movie. You know how they start the picture up real close and then back it off steady and far? Well, that's how I dream it. I'm living in McDonald's and it's real late at night and you see me up close, smiling, and then you see the whole McDonald's from the outside, lit up and friendly. And I get smaller and smaller, like they do, and then it's just a light in the darkness, like a star, and I'm in it. I'm part of that light, part of the whole sky, and it's all McDonald's, but part of something even bigger, something fixed and shiny...like plastic.

I know. I know. It's just a dream. Just a beacon in the storm. But you got to have a dream. It's our dreams make us what we are.

Blackout

TRY THIS 2.11

Write a short scene between two characters who are engaged in some physical activity (rock climbing, scrubbing the floor, trying to make a fire—pick something). In their conversation, they never acknowledge or refer to whatever they are doing. Play with it.

WORKING TOWARD A DRAFT

Take any passage you have written and underline the abstractions, especially the names of qualities and judgments. Replace each of these with its opposite. In some instances this will make nonsense. In some it may provide an insight. Do any of the changes suggest a way of enriching your idea? Pursue the possibility in a few paragraphs of focused freewrite (see page 1).

If you spent your childhood on either side of the millennium, you've probably seen Maurice Sendak's picture book *Where the Wild Things Are.* (If not, it's worth looking up.) It's a simple story: Max is full of bad-tempered mischief and his mother sends him to bed without his supper. He's still mad. His room turns into a forest; he sails away to the land of the wild things, who make him king of the wild things, and they all have a great rumpus. When Max stops them with a command, he feels lonely, so he sails back to his bedroom, where his supper is waiting for him.

The question is, *where* are *the wild things?* And the answer is, *in Max's head.* They represent (very visibly and sensibly) a boy's tantrum. Notice that the wild things have to be manifested; they must gnash and snarl and make a rumpus in order for there to be a story. Most of the book is taken up (to children's delight) with the antics of the wild things.

The story also offers an extended real-world message: *If you misbehave, you'll be punished, but your mother will not let you starve.*

As you develop a piece, ask yourself: *Where are the wild things?* Make sure you provide us with the visible (and/or other sense) manifestations of the characters' emotions. Who are the monsters in this story? What are the wild things in the character's head?

CHAPTER 3

Voice

- *Your Voice*
- *Persona*
- *Irony*
- *Character Voice*
- *Point of View*

... my theory is that everyone *has* a voice, *is* a voice, and that you're not going to lose it by stretching your capacities and seeing what else you can do.

Mark Doty

Getty Image 163442618

WARM-UP

Write a speech balloon for each of these characters. Then write a paragraph in the voice of each. Who are the men, and what might they be saying to each other? Who are the women, and what are they talking about? Try to make each character distinct in what they say, their attitude, word choice, and rhythm.

YOU PICK UP THE PHONE AND SOMEONE SAYS, "HELLO. You're home, are you?" and with just these five words you know, although you haven't heard from him for ten years, that Uncle Ed is calling. You turn on the radio and hear "... because the American people ..." and before the familiar phrase is out you know exactly which politician is giving a speech. How do you recognize these voices? How is it possible to be so certain with so little information?

Of course, when you literally *hear* a voice, you have many subtle aural clues—accent, volume, tone, timbre, pitch, rhythm—to help you identify it. As a writer you have only the words, their choice and arrangement, with which to create a unique voice. Yet writers' voices are recognizable too. They too create patterns that approximate all the qualities named above. As a reader you fall in love with particular poetic or narrative voices, and as a writer you may "try on" or imitate those voices as part of the process of finding your own.

Diction (which is a combination of **vocabulary**, the words chosen, and **syntax**, the order in which they are used) can impart particularity to a poem or prose, just as tone and pitch and timbre make up a particular voice. Diction will convey not only the facts but what we are to make of them, not only the situation but its emotional coloration, not only the identity but also the attitude of the person who speaks to us from the page. Joan Didion expresses this phenomenon in terms of "grammar," in the essay "Why I Write":

> *All I know about grammar ... is its infinite power. To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed. Many people know about camera angles now, but not so many people know about sentences. The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind.*

Beyond imitation, if as a writer you pay attention to the image in your mind, and if you develop the flexibility of vocabulary and syntax that allows you to be true to that image, you will be on your way to a voice that is recognizably your own.

Your Voice

> We can only talk about ourselves in the language we have available. If that language is rich, it illuminates us. But if it is narrow or restricted, it represses and conceals us.
>
> *Jaan Whitehead*

An author's voice has a quality developed over time, involving recurrent word choice, syntax, imagery, idiom, rhythm, and range. It comes about by a mostly automatic process, the result of practice and the growing confidence

that practice brings. Don't worry about "finding your voice." Worry about saying things as clearly, precisely, and vividly as you can. Make your language as rich, flexible, and varied as you can make it. In other words: seek *to voice,* and *your voice* will follow.

The language that comes naturally to you is the fine and proper foundation of your voice. Nothing rings more false than a writer who puts on the airs of critical jargon or medieval fantasy or high culture without having a convincing command of that language. On the other hand, training your awareness of language, stretching both the quantity and the flexibility of your vocabulary, and playing at different human voices can all expand your range.

It can't hurt to go about adding to your vocabulary in even a self-improvement sort of way. Buy a word-a-day calendar and subscribe to wordsmith.org and Merriam Webster's Word of the Day online. Or just type "vocabulary" into your browser and take your pick of the sites. Buy a really good dictionary. Dissect the diction of the authors you read, and if you don't know a word, look it up. Your word processing software probably has a decent, if minimal, thesaurus. But every writer I know owns a *Roget's Thesaurus,* a blessed aid to locating not a fancier word to say what you mean (that *chicken* is not, really, a *chanticleer*!) but the word with that exact shade of meaning you almost have in mind (it might well be a *broiler* or a *bantam* or a *Rhode Island Red*).

Begin by knowing, and exploring, the fact that you already have a number of different voices. You speak differently in class from the way you speak (even to the same people) at a party or a bar. You have one diction for your diary and another for your history paper. You use one style of vocabulary and syntax to console a friend and another to ditch a date.

You also have a different vocabulary for shades of meaning, so that according to the circumstances you might describe someone as *stuck-up, snobbish, arrogant, haughty,* or *imperious.* There is no such thing as an exact synonym. Each word would be appropriate to a description of a different person, a different mood or tone, a different medium, even a different speaker.

TRY THIS 3.1

Stuck-up, snobbish, arrogant, haughty, imperious. Pick three of these words, and for each produce an image in words of a person who fits it. To what extent does "the picture dictate the arrangement" of the words?

(continued)

(Try This 3.1 continued)
Then:

Pick one of the following words and list as many synonyms for it as you can. Pick three of the synonyms, and for each produce an image in words that expresses it. How do the images differ?

awesome
shabby
weird
far
smart
red

Persona

A **persona** is a mask adopted by the author, which may be a public manifestation of the author's self, or a distorted or partial version of that self, or a fictional, historical, or mythological character. The concept of a persona allows us to acknowledge that, just as no written account can tell the whole truth about an event, so no "I" of a poem, essay, or story is exactly the same as the person who writes. When you write "as yourself" in your own voice—in a personal essay or a lyric poem, for example—there is nevertheless a certain distance between the person you are as you go about living your daily life and the *persona* in which you write. The version of yourself that you choose to reveal is part of your meaning. No matter how earnest your attempt to tell "exactly what happened," "the author" is always a partial or slightly idealized you, writing from a frame of mind more focused and consistent—and probably more virtuous—than any person ever possessed. Even if you are confessing terrible sins, you write as one-who-confesses, which is a particular, and admirable, version of your composite total self.

When you speak in your "own" voice, that voice may be relatively intimate and confiding—one that, though artful, we trust to be as honest with us as possible, as in this memoir-poem of Anne Sexton's, "Young."

A thousand doors ago
when I was a lonely kid
in a big house with four
garages and it was summer
as long as I could remember
I lay on the lawn at night,
clover wrinkling under me,
the wise stars bedding over me,
my mother's window a funnel
of yellow heat running out,

my father's window, half shut,
an eye where sleepers pass
and the boards of the house
were smooth and white as wax
and probably a million leaves
sailed on their strange stalks
as the crickets ticked together
and I, in my brand new body,
which was not a woman's yet,
told the stars my questions
and thought God could really see
the heat and the painted light,
elbows, knees, dreams, goodnight.

Here one may feel how the words are "found in the picture" in the poet's mind, how for example the "thousand doors ago" or the "window a funnel of yellow heat running out" reach for an exactness of image, mood, and memory. But the diction might instead signal a more fanciful mask, like this one in which Anne Sexton plays on a conventional image of power and malevolence for her persona:

Her Kind

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind....

Prose writers can exercise a similar range of personae. One way of looking at the author of a memoir or personal essay is that that writer is the main character or protagonist of a true story. Again, the persona may be confessional and direct:

When my family packed up and moved from the backwoods of Tennessee to the backwoods of Ohio I was not quite six years old. Like most children at that age I was still a two-legged smudge. Hardly a thing about me was definite except my way of talking, and that soon landed me in trouble. The kids in Ohio took one listen to my Tennessee accent and decided I was a hick. They let me know their opinion by calling me not only hick but hillbilly, ridge runner, clodhopper, and hayseed.

"Coming from the Country," Scott Russell Sanders

But this is far from the only way you might choose to present your "self" as author. Any number of masks may be donned. Here is Dave Barry writing

from the persona of Ignorant Literal-Minded Guy, a mask that has been enormously popular among American essayists since Mark Twain:

> *...obviously the real cause of the California electricity shortage is: college students. I base this statement on widespread observation of my son, who is a college student, and who personally consumes more electricity than Belgium. If my son is in a room, then every electrical device within 200 yards of that room—every light, computer, television, stereo, video game, microwave oven, etc.—will be running. My son doesn't even have to turn the devices on; they activate themselves spontaneously in response to his presence.*

This comic persona depends partly on exaggeration and an inflated vocabulary, out of tone in relation to the content: *widespread observation, personally consumes, electrical device, spontaneously in response.* It also mocks scientific logic, "basing the statement" on a single case.

TRY THIS 3.2
Imagine (remember?) that you have borrowed ("borrowed"?) a car and been involved in a fender bender. Write an explanation for the police report. Write a **monologue** (a speech for one voice) explaining the accident to the friend (parent?) whose car you borrowed. Write a letter telling about it to a friend who thinks you are truly cool.

Irony

The great critic and teacher Lionel Trilling identified three sorts of **irony** available to the writer.

1. *Verbal irony:* the device by which we say one thing and mean another.
2. *Dramatic irony:* the mainly theatrical device by which the audience has crucial information that the characters do not.
3. *Cosmic irony:* our perception of the human condition, in which our efforts are thwarted, often by our best intentions.

The first of these, verbal irony, is a way of using voice. It is achieved by some sort of mismatch between the tone and the content and is capable of myriad effects: serious, comic, threatening, satirical, and so forth. Sarcasm is a crude manifestation of everyday irony: "I really do appreciate you emptying the cat box while I'm eating." The previous passage by Dave Berry is an example of irony as comedy, the tone suggesting scientific objectivity, the content a domestic complaint. A mismatch between tone and content can also set the scene, as in the understated opening to Michael Chabon's literary detective novel *The Yiddish Policemen's Union.*

> *Nine months Landsman's been flopping at the hotel Zamenhof without any of his fellow residents managing to get themselves murdered. Now somebody has put a bullet in the brain of the occupant of 208....*

Or it can convey a political point, as in Jonathan Swift's famous "A Modest Proposal," in which he enthusiastically "solves" both the overpopulation and the food shortage in Ireland.

> *I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled....*

Irony is often achieved by using formal or understated language for extreme events, but it can also be a way of characterizing through the voice of someone who makes verbal mountains of molehills. This is Doris from the monologue *A Cream Cracker Under the Settee* by Alan Bennett:

> *Couple came round last week. Braying on the door. They weren't bona fide callers, they had a Bible. I didn't go. Only they opened the letter box and started shouting about Jesus. "Good news," they kept shouting. "Good news." They left the gate open, never mind good news. They ought to get their priorities right. Shouting about Jesus and leaving gates open. It's hypocrisy is that.*

TRY THIS 3.3

Pick a story from today's newspaper about an outrageous or terrible event. Write a paragraph about it in the tone of an official who considers it politically necessary, a Sunday school teacher explaining it as God's plan, or a social scientist analyzing it for current trends.

Then:

Write a paragraph about a trivial matter (dividing a cookie, breaking a fingernail, the coffee being too hot, or something similar) in a tone of outrage.

Character Voice

I'll tell my state as though 'twere none of mine.

Robert Browning

In ways other than ironic, you may also speak in the persona of a character who is largely or totally unlike you. A **character**'s voice is a chosen mimicry and is one of the most rewarding devices of imaginative writing, a skill to pursue in order to develop rich characters both in their narratives and in their dialogue. Your voice will never be entirely absent from the voice of the characters you create, but the characters too can be distinct and recognizable.

The voice of a character requires, beyond invention, an imaginative leap into the mind and diction of another person. The best way to develop this capability is, first, to listen to other people speaking and to become aware of their speech patterns, vocabulary choice, habits of diction, and then to

practice launching yourself into the voices you have heard. You already have a foundation for this skill through your knowledge of other writers' efforts. Here, for instance, are some very brief examples, most of them familiar to you, of characters announcing their own identities. Notice how much they tell you about themselves, the worlds they inhabit, and their attitudes, in a very few words:

Call me Ishmael. (*Moby Dick*, Herman Melville)

My name is Bond—James Bond. (the series of Bond novels by Ian Fleming)

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings.
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair. (*Ozymandias*, Percy Bysshe Shelley)

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair.
And I eat men like air. (*Lady Lazarus*, Sylvia Plath)

I am but mad north-northwest: when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw. (*Hamlet*, Shakespeare)

I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. (John 11:25)

I am a man more sinn'd against than sinning. (*King Lear*, Shakespeare)

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap.... (*The Catcher in the Rye*, J. D. Salinger)

When I look back on my childhood, I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood. (*Angela's Ashes*, Frank McCourt)

TRY THIS 3.4
Write a short character sketch of someone you dislike (you need not reveal this person's identity). Write a monologue in which that person tells you an anecdote from his or her childhood.

You could say, and be roughly accurate, that there is a hierarchy of distance between the author and the voice. The memoirist or personal essayist is most likely to be closest to the person writing; the lyric poet is somewhat more distanced by the artifice of the language; the fiction writer has a range of masks from "author" to characters; and the dramatist speaks only through

the characters, theoretically never speaking in his/her own voice except in stage directions.

The voices that you as author create involve not just word choice but the fundamental human capacity for mimicry—which, however, can be deliberately cultivated by careful listening as well as trial and error. A character's voice comes out of, and can convey, a historical period, a class, a set of circumstances, emotions, and the myriad quirks of typicality and eccentricity. Think of the differences in speech between a televangelist and a hip-hop groupie, or even a "master stylist" and the neighborhood barber. Voice, said Philip Roth, is "something that begins at around the back of the knees and reaches well above the head."

Great potential for contrast, irony, and conflict enters the writing when one voice is set off against another. Characters reveal themselves in conversation and confrontation not only in the ideas they consciously express but in the diction they use, the things that "just slip out"—and the things they refuse or fail to say. The next chapter will look at dialogue, which can lead not only to character revelation but to the heart of story, which is discovery and decision.

TRY THIS 3.5

Go back to the character in your "bumper sticker" exercise on page 24. Find a few more details to describe that character. Then pick a trigger line from those below and use it to start a monologue in that character's voice. If you feel you are not catching the voice, never mind; keep going.

- I don't normally dress this way, but...
- I had a dream last night...
- I'll tell you what doesn't make any sense...
- I'm sorry, I didn't see you...
- What I need is some kind of work that...
- I remember when you could...

Point of View

> I am the narrator. I am just up in the sky telling the story. I just know everything. So pay no attention to me.
>
> *Josiah Sable, ten years old*

Closely allied to the concept of voice is **point of view**. We're used to using the phrase "point of view" as a synonym for "opinion," as in, "It's my point of view that young people watch too much television." But point of view as a literary technique is a complex and specific concept dealing with vantage point and addressing the question: *Who* is standing *where* to watch the scene? The answer will involve the voice of the teller, the intended listener, and the distance or closeness of both the action and the diction. An author's

view of the world, as it is and as it ought to be, will ultimately be revealed by manipulation of the point of view, but not vice versa—identifying the author's beliefs will not describe the point of view of the work.

Point of view is a slippery concept, but one over which you gradually gain control as you write. Apart from significant detail, there is no more important skill for a writer to grasp, for, as Carol Bly says in *The Passionate, Accurate Story*, these are the two skills that "divide master from apprentice." Once you have chosen a point of view, you have in effect made a "contract" with the reader, and it will be difficult to break the contract gracefully. If you have restricted yourself to the mind of Sally Anne for five pages, as she longingly watches Chuck and his R&B band, you will violate the contract by suddenly dipping into Chuck's mind to let us know what he thinks of groupies. We are likely to feel misused—and likely to cancel the contract altogether if you suddenly give us an omniscient lecture on the failings of the young.

The first point of view decision that you as a writer must make is the **person** in which you speak: *first person* (I walked out into the rain), *second person* (You walked out into the rain), or *third person* (She walked out into the rain).

All of the examples of persona in this chapter so far are in the **first person**: *I was a lonely kid... I have gone out, a possessed witch... I was not quite six years old... I base this statement... Call me Ishmael*, and so forth. The first person is the point of view most frequent in memoir, personal essay, and lyric poetry. Characters in a play speak, of course, in the first person. It is also the voice of much fiction, in which case it will be the voice of the **central narrator**, the *I* writing *my* story as if it were memoir; or else of a **peripheral narrator**, someone on the edge of the action, but nevertheless our eyes and ears in the story and therefore the person with whom we identify and with whom we must be moved or changed if the story is to succeed.

Notice that when you are writing in the first person voice of a fictional or dramatic character, the whole range of intimacy and distance is also possible in the diction. Bohumil Hrabal's young railway employee in the novel *Closely Observed Trains* tells his own story and takes us into his confidence as if he were writing a confessional memoir, in spite of the fact that he never existed:

> *I always had the impression—and I still have and always shall have—that behind every window there was at the very least one pair of eyes watching me. If anyone spoke to me I blushed, because I felt uncomfortably aware that there was something about me that disturbed and upset everybody. Three months ago I slashed my wrists, and on the face of it I had no reason to do such a thing, but I did have a reason, and I knew what it was, and I was only afraid that everyone who looked at me was guessing at what that reason could be.*

By contrast, in the play *Our Country's Good*, Timberlake Wertenbaker's Judge Collins of eighteenth-century Australia uses the distanced diction of profound and self-satisfied authority:

> *This land is under English law. The court found them guilty and sentenced them accordingly... I commend your endeavor to oppose the baneful influence of vice with the harmonizing acts of civilization, Governor, but I suspect your edifice will collapse without the mortar of fear.*

The **second person** is being used whenever the pronoun "you" occurs, but this may simply mean, in dialogue, that one character is addressing another. Sometimes it indicates not the point of view of the story but a general truth, possibly one in a character's mind:

> *Maureen was trying to write her weekly letter to Len. It was heavy going; you can't say much in a letter.*
>
> The Ice Age, *Margaret Drabble*

Or the pronoun "you" may represent the convention of the author addressing the reader:

> *You might think it's a bit rare, having long-distance cross-country runners in Borstal... but you're wrong, and I'll tell you why.*
>
> The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, *Alan Sillitoe*

Often, as in this case, the "you" refers to the person who is assumed to read or receive the piece. The basic point of view is still first person, as it is in Sharon Olds's poem "Feared Drowned," of which these are the first two stanzas:

> Suddenly nobody knows where you are,
> your suit black as seaweed, your bearded
> head slick as a seal's.
>
> Somebody watches the kids. I walk down the
> edge of the water, clutching the towel
> like a widow's shawl around me...

This use of the second person, as someone to whom speech, a poem, or story is addressed, can enhance a sense of intimacy, even make us feel as readers/viewers that we are overhearing something private.

The **second person** is the basic point of view of a piece only when the "you" is a character—usually in fact the reader, whom the author *turns into* a character by assuming she knows just how "you" behave in the situation she invents. Here is an example from Lorrie Moore's story "How to Be a Writer":

> *First, try to be something, anything, else. A movie star/astronaut. A movie star/missionary. The movie star/kindergarten teacher. President of the World. Fail*

miserably. It is best if you fail at an early age—say, fourteen. Early, critical disillusionment is necessary so that at fifteen you can write long haiku sequences about thwarted desire. It is a pond, a cherry blossom, a wind brushing against sparrow wing leaving for mountain. Count the syllables. Show it to your mom.

The second person as a basic point of view, in which "you" become the character, tends to be experimental and self-conscious, and may be set aside or saved for special effects.

TRY THIS 3.6

Write about a situation in which you were badly stressed. But write about it in the first person, *from the point of view of someone else* who was present.

Or:

Write about it in the second person, keeping in mind that you're trying to make your reader identify and "become you."

The **third person** is frequently used in poetry and fiction, as well as being the basic voice of the nonfiction writer. This is the voice with the greatest range of effects, from total objectivity to great intimacy.

The third person voice in imaginative writing can be roughly divided into three techniques:

- The **omniscient** or godlike narrator, who may know anything past, present, or future and is free to tell us readers what to think or feel
- The **limited omniscient**, who may go into the mind of one or perhaps two characters and also observe from the outside
- The **objective**, who may know no more than a person observing the scene—the facts and whatever is present to the senses

The omniscient author was a frequent stance of nineteenth-century fiction, where the persona of "author" took on an all-knowing quality:

Caroline Helstone was just eighteen years old; and at eighteen the true narrative of life has yet to be commenced. Before that time, we sit listening to a tale, a marvelous fiction; delightful sometimes, and sad sometimes; almost always unreal.... Hope, when she smiles on us, and promises happiness tomorrow, is implicitly believed;—Love, when he comes wandering like a lost angel to our door, is at once admitted, welcomed, embraced.... Alas, Experience! No other mentor has so wasted and frozen a face...

Shirley, *Charlotte Brontë*

This voice obviously involves a lot of "telling" and in order to avoid that outdated tone, in the twentieth century it became usual for "the author" to

assume the more modest capability of the limited omniscient, able to go into one character's mind and emotions and also to tell us objectively what, if we were present, we would be able to perceive for ourselves, but not to leap from the mind of one character to another.

> *By the time they were halfway through Harvard Yard, Tip was seriously questioning the wisdom of his own decision to leave the house at all. His leg had progressed far beyond aching. The pain in his sciatic nerve was sharp and somewhat electrical in nature.... He had, despite all better knowledge, dug the crutches into his brachial plexus and slowly crushed it, sending a radiation up his neck and into the back of his head that was like a persistent hammer slamming a reluctant nail.*
>
> Run, *Ann Patchett*

The perception in these two passages involves the vulnerability and inexperience of youth, but in the first the convention of "the author" holds all the answers, whereas in the second "the author" is an unvoiced presence. We experience Tip's pain and his self-questioning from the inside, while at the same time getting a quasiscientific explanation of the source of pain. Since Tip is a scientist, this factual information is appropriate to the character.

In the objective viewpoint, the author may choose a strictly journalistic stance, reporting only what may be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched, and objectively known. This is a favorite stance of Ernest Hemingway's. In the story "Hills Like White Elephants," Hemingway reports what is said and done by a quarreling couple, both without any direct revelation of the characters' thoughts and without comment.

> *The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building. It was very hot and the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid.*
>
> *"What should we drink?" the girl asked. She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.*
>
> *"It's pretty hot," the man said.*
>
> *"Let's drink beer."*
>
> *"Dos cervezas," the man said into the curtain.*
>
> *"Big ones?" a woman asked from the doorway.*
>
> *"Yes. Two big ones."*
>
> *The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.*

The narrative remains clipped, austere, and external. What Hemingway gains by this pretense of objective reporting is that the reader is allowed to discover what is really happening through gestures, repetitions, and slips of the tongue, as in life.

TRY THIS 3.7
Take any passage you have written in the first person and recast it in the objective voice. Try to reveal the thoughts and feelings of the original through speech, gesture, action, and image.

Beyond the choice of person, point of view importantly involves the question of the **distance** between the author/reader and the characters. John Gardner, in *The Art of Fiction*, succinctly illustrates some of the possibilities of distance in the third person:

1. It was winter of the year 1853. A large man stepped out of a doorway.
2. Henry J. Warburton had never cared much for snowstorms.
3. Henry hated snowstorms.
4. God how he hated these damn snowstorms.
5. Snow. Under your collar, down inside our shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul.

From the impersonality of *large man* through increasingly familiar designations (full name, first name, pronoun), to the identification implied in the second person (*your collar, your shoes, your soul*), these examples reduce the formality of the diction and therefore the psychic and psychological distance between the author-and-reader and the character.

The degree of distance will involve a series of questions, of which *who speaks?* is only the first. It will also involve *to whom?* (the reader? another character? the self?), *in what form?* (a story? a journal? a report? a daydream?), *at what distance?* (an old man telling the story of his youth? a prisoner recounting his crime?), and *with what limitations?* (is the narrator a liar? a child? crazy?). The voice of the speaker, whether autobiographical, poetic persona, narrator, or character, always involves these issues. Because the author *inevitably wants to convince us to share the same perspective*, the answers will also help reveal her or his final opinion, judgment, attitude, or message.

In many ways, our language has been impoverished—by politics, ads, ignorance, and suspicion of eloquence. In the Renaissance it was socially valuable to be able to speak well; you could talk yourself into court or into bed. Whereas in America, and especially from the latter half of the twentieth century, we have tended to equate eloquence with arrogance at

best and dishonesty at worst, preferring people who, like, you know, well, kinda couldn't exactly, like, say what they mean. Sort of. Whole concepts have disappeared via advertising from our fund of expression. We no longer have meaningful ways to say *the real thing*, or *the right choice*, or *new and improved*, or *makes you feel young again*, or *just do it*. The words *wonderful, great, grand, distinctive, elegant, exclusive, purity, pleasure, passion, mastery, mystery*, and *natural* have been co-opted and corrupted. If I say so much as, "Ask your doctor..." it's clear that I've got something to sell.

Paradoxically, this impoverishment allows the writer myriad ways to characterize. Though it may be difficult to write convincingly from the lofty perspective of all-knowing authority, a rich awareness of voice and voices, their particular idioms and diction, can give you a range of perspectives from which to write. You can make legitimate and revealing use of jargon, cliché, malapropisms (misused words), overstatement, and so forth in the mouth of a character. Such language is a way of signaling distance between author and character, a distance that the reader understands and shares. A famous example is Amanda Wingfield of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, who here berates her son:

> *Oh, I can see the handwriting on the wall as plain as I see the nose in front of my face! It's terrifying! More and more you remind me of your father! He was out all hours without explanation—then* left! *And me with the bag to hold.*

TRY THIS 3.8

Write a speech in which a character strings together a bunch of clichés or jargon phrases. Let the clichés characterize. However, be sure you have some sympathy for the character.

If you persevere in writing, "your voice" will inevitably take on a coloration that is entirely your own. At the same time, voice is a powerful force for exploring the inner lives of others. Story writer Grace Paley describes the process this way: "...what we write about is *what we don't know about what we know*...when you take this other voice—you're making a 'pull.' You're pulling towards another head. And that pull toward what you *don't* know...well, that's the story itself. The story is that stretching...that *act* of stretching."

More to Read

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Alvarez, A. *The Writer's Voice*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005. Print.

ALICE WALKER

Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self

It is a bright summer day in 1947. My father, a fat, funny man with beautiful eyes and a subversive wit, is trying to decide which of his eight children he will take with him to the county fair. My mother, of course, will not go. She is knocked out from getting most of us ready: I hold my neck stiff against the pressure of her knuckles as she hastily completes the braiding and then beribboning of my hair.

My father is the driver for the rich old white lady up the road. Her name is Miss Mey. She owns all the land for miles around, as well as the house in which we live. All I remember about her is that she once offered to pay my mother thirty-five cents for cleaning her house, raking up piles of her magnolia leaves, and washing her family's clothes, and that my mother—she of no money, eight children, and a chronic earache—refused it. But I do not think of this in 1947. I am two and a half years old. I want to go everywhere my daddy goes. I am excited at the prospect of riding in a car. Someone has told me fairs are fun. That there is room in the car for only three of us doesn't faze me at all. Whirling happily in my starchy frock, showing off my biscuit-polished patent-leather shoes and lavender socks, tossing my head in a way that makes my ribbons bounce, I stand, hands on hips, before my father. "Take me, Daddy," I say with assurance; "I'm the prettiest!"

Later, it does not surprise me to find myself in Miss Mey's shiny black car, sharing the back seat with the other lucky ones. Does not surprise me that I thoroughly enjoy the fair. At home that night I tell the unlucky ones all I can remember about the merry-go-round, the man who eats live chickens, and the teddy bears, until they say: that's enough, baby Alice. Shut up now, and go to sleep.

It is Easter Sunday, 1950. I am dressed in a green, flocked, scalloped-hem dress (handmade by my adoring sister, Ruth) that has its own smooth satin petticoat and tiny hot-pink roses tucked into each scallop. My shoes, new T-strap patent leather, again highly biscuit-polished. I am six years old and have learned one of the longest Easter speeches to be heard that day, totally unlike the speech I said when I was two: "Easter lilies/pure and white/blossom in/the morning light." When I rise to give my speech I do so on a great wave of love and pride and expectation. People in the church stop rustling

their new crinolines. They seem to hold their breath. I can tell they admire my dress, but it is my spirit, bordering on sassiness (womanishness), they secretly applaud.

"That girl's a little *mess*," they whisper to each other, pleased. 5

Naturally I say my speech without stammer or pause, unlike those who stutter, stammer, or, worst of all, forget. This is before the word "beautiful" exists in people's vocabulary, but "Oh, isn't she the *cutest* thing!" frequently floats my way. "And got so much sense!" they gratefully add... for which thoughtful addition I thank them to this day.

It was great fun being cute. But then, one day, it ended.

I am eight years old and a tomboy. I have a cowboy hat, cowboy boots, checkered shirt and pants, all red. My playmates are my brothers, two and four years older than I. Their colors are black and green, the only difference in the way we are dressed. On Saturday nights we all go to the picture show, even my mother; Westerns are her favorite kind of movie. Back home, "on the ranch," we pretend we are Tom Mix, Hopalong Cassidy, Lash LaRue (we've even named one of our dogs Lash LaRue); we chase each other for hours rustling cattle, being outlaws, delivering damsels from distress. Then my parents decide to buy my brothers guns. These are not "real" guns. They shoot "BBs," copper pellets my brothers say will kill birds. Because I am a girl, I do not get a gun. Instantly I am relegated to the position of Indian. Now there appears a great distance between us. They shoot and shoot at everything with their new guns. I try to keep up with my bow and arrows.

One day while I am standing on top of our makeshift garage—pieces of tin nailed across some poles—holding my bow and arrow and looking out toward the fields, I feel an incredible blow in my right eye. I look down just in time to see my brother lower his gun.

Both brothers rush to my side. My eye stings, and I cover it with my 10
hand. "If you tell," they say, "we will get a whipping. You don't want that to happen, do you?" I do not. "Here is a piece of wire," says the older brother, picking it up from the roof; "say you stepped on one end of it and the other flew up and hit you." The pain is beginning to start. "Yes," I say. "Yes, I will say that is what happened." If I do not say this is what happened, I know my brothers will find ways to make me wish I had. But now I will say anything that gets me to my mother.

Confronted by our parents we stick to the lie agreed upon. They place me on a bench on the porch and I close my left eye while they examine the right. There is a tree growing from underneath the porch that climbs past the railing to the roof. It is the last thing my right eye sees. I watch as its trunk, its branches, and then its leaves are blotted out by the rising blood.

I am in shock. First there is intense fever, which my father tries to break using lily leaves bound around my head. Then there are chills: my mother

tries to get me to eat soup. Eventually, I do not know how, my parents learn what has happened. A week after the "accident" they take me to see a doctor. "Why did you wait so long to come?" he asks, looking into my eye and shaking his head. "Eyes are sympathetic," he says. "If one is blind, the other will likely become blind too."

This comment of the doctor's terrifies me. But it is really how I look that bothers me most. Where the BB pellet struck there is a glob of whitish scar tissue, a hideous cataract, on my eye. Now when I stare at people—a favorite pastime, up to now—they will stare back. Not at the "cute" little girl, but at her scar. For six years I do not stare at anyone, because I do not raise my head.

Years later, in the throes of a mid-life crisis, I ask my mother and sister whether I changed after the "accident." "No," they say, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

15 *What do I mean?*

I am eight, and, for the first time, doing poorly in school, where I have been something of a whiz since I was four. We have just moved to the place where the "accident" occurred. We do not know any of the people around us because this is a different county. The only time I see the friends I knew is when we go back to our old church. The new school is the former state penitentiary. It is a large stone building, cold and drafty, crammed to overflowing with boisterous, ill-disciplined children. On the third floor there is a huge circular imprint of some partition that has been torn out.

"What used to be here?" I ask a sullen girl next to me on our way past it to lunch.

"The electric chair," says she.

At night I have nightmares about the electric chair, and about all the people reputedly "fried" in it. I am afraid of the school, where all the students seem to be budding criminals.

20 "What's the matter with your eye?" they ask, critically.

When I don't answer (I cannot decide whether it was an "accident" or not), they shove me, insist on a fight.

My brother, the one who created the story about the wire, comes to my rescue. But then brags so much about "protecting" me, I become sick.

After months of torture at the school, my parents decide to send me back to our old community, to my old school. I live with my grandparents and the teacher they board. But there is no room for Phoebe, my cat. By the time my grandparents decide there *is* room, and I ask for my cat, she cannot be found. Miss Yarborough, the boarding teacher, takes me under her wing, and begins to teach me to play the piano. But soon she marries an African—a "prince," she says—and is whisked away to his continent.

At my old school there is at least one teacher who loves me. She is the teacher who "knew me before I was born" and bought my first baby clothes. It is she who makes life bearable. It is her presence that finally helps me turn on the one child at the school who continually calls me "one-eyed bitch." One day I simply grab him by his coat and beat him until I am satisfied. It is my teacher who tells me my mother is ill.

My mother is lying in bed in the middle of the day, something I have never seen. She is in too much pain to speak. She has an abscess in her ear. I stand looking down on her, knowing that if she dies, I cannot live. She is being treated with warm oils and hot bricks held against her cheek. Finally a doctor comes. But I must go back to my grandparents' house. The weeks pass but I am hardly aware of it. All I know is that my mother might die, my father is not so jolly, my brothers still have their guns, and I am the one sent away from home. 25

"You did not change," they say.

Did I imagine the anguish of never looking up?

I am twelve. When relatives come to visit I hide in my room. My cousin Brenda, just my age, whose father works in the post office and whose mother is a nurse, comes to find me. "Hello," she says. And then she asks, looking at my recent school picture, which I did not want taken, and on which the "glob," as I think of it, is clearly visible, "You still can't see out of that eye?"

"No," I say, and flop back on the bed over my book.

That night, as I do almost every night, I abuse my eye. I rant and rave at it, in front of the mirror. I plead with it to clear up before morning. I tell it I hate and despise it. I do not pray for sight. I pray for beauty. 30

"You did not change," they say.

I am fourteen and baby-sitting for my brother Bill, who lives in Boston. He is my favorite brother and there is a strong bond between us. Understanding my feelings of shame and ugliness he and his wife take me to a local hospital, where the "glob" is removed by a doctor named O. Henry. There is still a small bluish crater where the scar tissue was, but the ugly white stuff is gone. Almost immediately I become a different person from the girl who does not raise her head. Or so I think. Now that I've raised my head I win the boyfriend of my dreams. Now that I've raised my head I have plenty of friends. Now that I've raised my head classwork comes from my lips as faultlessly as Easter speeches did, and I leave high school as valedictorian, most popular student, and *queen*, hardly believing my luck. Ironically, the girl who was voted most beautiful in our class (and was) was later shot twice through the chest by a male companion, using a "real" gun, while she was pregnant. But that's another story in itself. Or is it?

"You did not change," they say.

It is now thirty years since the "accident." A beautiful journalist comes to visit and to interview me. She is going to write a cover story for her magazine

that focuses on my latest book. "Decide how you want to look on the cover," she says. "Glamorous, or whatever."

Never mind "glamorous," it is the "whatever" that I hear. Suddenly all I can think of is whether I will get enough sleep the night before the photography session: if I don't, my eye will be tired and wander, as blind eyes will.

At night in bed with my lover I think up reasons why I should not appear on the cover of a magazine. "My meanest critics will say I've sold out," I say. "My family will now realize I write scandalous books."

"But what's the real reason you don't want to do this?" he asks.

"Because in all probability," I say in a rush, "my eye won't be straight."

"It will be straight enough," he says. Then, "Besides, I thought you'd made your peace with that."

And I suddenly remember that I have.

I remember:

I am talking to my brother Jimmy, asking if he remembers anything unusual about the day I was shot. He does not know I consider that day the last time my father, with his sweet home remedy of cool lily leaves, chose me, and that I suffered and raged inside because of this. "Well," he says, "all I remember is standing by the side of the highway with Daddy, trying to flag down a car. A white man stopped, but when Daddy said he needed somebody to take his little girl to the doctor, he drove off."

I remember:

I am in the desert for the first time. I fall totally in love with it. I am so overwhelmed by its beauty, I confront for the first time, consciously, the meaning of the doctor's words years ago: "Eyes are sympathetic. If one is blind, the other will likely become blind too." I realize I have dashed about the world madly, looking at this, looking at that, storing up images against the fading of the light. *But I might have missed seeing the desert!* The shock of that possibility—and gratitude for over twenty-five years of sight—sends me literally to my knees. Poem after poem comes—which is perhaps how poets pray.

On Sight

I am so thankful I have seen
The Desert
And the creatures in the desert
And the desert Itself.
The desert has its own moon
Which I have seen
With my own eye.
There is no flag on it.
Trees of the desert have arms
All of which are always up

That is because the moon is up
The sun is up
Also the sky
The stars
Clouds
None with flags.
If there *were* flags, I doubt
the trees would point.
Would you?

But mostly, I remember this:

I am twenty-seven, and my baby daughter is almost three. Since her birth I have worried about her discovery that her mother's eyes are different from other people's. Will she be embarrassed? I think. What will she say? Every day she watches a television program called "Big Blue Marble." It begins with a picture of the earth as it appears from the moon. It is bluish, a little battered-looking, but full of light, with whitish clouds swirling around it. Every time I see it I weep with love, as if it is a picture of Grandma's house. One day when I am putting Rebecca down for her nap, she suddenly focuses on my eye. Something inside me cringes, gets ready to try to protect myself. All children are cruel about physical differences, I know from experience, and that they don't always mean to be is another matter. I assume Rebecca will be the same.

But no-o-o-o. She studies my face intently as we stand, her inside and me outside her crib. She even holds my face maternally between her dimpled little hands. Then, looking every bit as serious and lawyerlike as her father, she says, as if it may just possibly have slipped my attention: "Mommy, there's a *world* in your eye." (As in, "Don't be alarmed, or do anything crazy.") And then, gently, but with great interest: "Mommy, where did you *get* that world in your eye?"

For the most part, the pain left then. (So what, if my brothers grew up to buy even more powerful pellet guns for their sons and to carry real guns themselves. So what, if a young "Morehouse man" once nearly fell off the steps of Trevor Arnett Library because he thought my eyes were blue.) Crying and laughing I ran to the bathroom, while Rebecca mumbled and sang herself off to sleep. Yes indeed, I realized, looking into the mirror. There *was* a world in my eye. And I saw that it was possible to love it: that in fact, for all it had taught me of shame and anger and inner vision, I *did* love it. Even to see it drifting out of orbit in boredom, or rolling up out of fatigue, not to mention floating back at attention in excitement (bearing witness, a friend has called it), deeply suitable to my personality, and even characteristic of me.

That night I dream I am dancing to Stevie Wonder's song "Always" (the name of the song is really "As," but I hear it as "Always"). As I dance,

whirling and joyous, happier than I've ever been in my life, another bright-faced dancer joins me. We dance and kiss each other and hold each other through the night. The other dancer has obviously come through all right, as I have done. She is beautiful, whole and free. And she is also me.

TRY THIS 3.9
Everyone hates something about his or her body. Write a poem or a few paragraphs in the first person about what you hate about yours. What tone will you choose? Are you laughing at yourself, genuinely grieving, wry, angry, over it?

WARREN J. BOWE

Guns for Teachers

Finally the Republicans have found a meaningful way to support teachers. As both a teacher and a citizen, I spotted the win-win logic of Representative Frank Lasee's proposal immediately. Not only would schools be safer, but the billions added to Wisconsin's economy by a new school gun industry would be a great windfall for the state.

With more than 60,000 teachers in Wisconsin's public schools alone, such a law would help both mom-and-pop gun shops and the big retailers. Specialty products could include guns manufactured in school colors or engraved with school logos. Gun accessories will bring in additional revenue. I would need an everyday holster as well as one for such special occasions as parent-teacher conferences, concerts, athletic events, etc.

While this proposed legislation is way better than that supporting the shooting of feral cats, a few kinks would need to be worked out. For example, would the state taxpayers fund the law, or would teachers have to pay for the heat they pack? Would there be a special ammunition budget? Would we be given extra in-service time for range practice? Could we implement merit pay for those of us who are crack shots?

And, most important, how threatening would students need to be before we get to shoot them? In the interim, maybe we could just start hitting them again.

TRY THIS 3.10
Bowe's mini-essay belongs to the long tradition of **epistolary essays**, written in the form of a letter—in this case a letter to the editor. It is also in the tradition of "A Modest Proposal." Write a "modest proposal." Pick an issue you really care about and "solve" it with a solution drastically worse than the problem. If the problem is one covered in the news, you might send it as a letter to the editor.

GEORGE SAUNDERS

Victory Lap

Three days shy of her fifteenth birthday, Alison Pope paused at the top of the stairs.

Say the staircase was marble. Say she descended and all heads turned. Where was {special one}? Approaching now, bowing slightly, he exclaimed, How can so much grace be contained in one small package? Oops. Had he said *small package?* And just stood there? Broad princelike face totally bland of expression? Poor thing! Sorry, no way, down he went, he was definitely not {special one}.

What about this guy, behind Mr. Small Package, standing near the home entertainment center? With a thick neck of farmer integrity yet tender ample lips, who, placing one hand on the small of her back, whispered, Dreadfully sorry you had to endure that bit about the small package just now. Let us go stand on the moon. Or, uh, in the moon. In the moonlight.

Had he said, *Let us go stand on the moon?* If so, she would have to be like, {eyebrows up}. And if no wry acknowledgment was forthcoming, be like, Uh, I am not exactly dressed for standing on the moon, which, as I understand it, is super-cold?

Come on, guys, she couldn't keep treading gracefully on this marble stairwell in her mind forever! That dear old white-hair in the tiara was getting all like, *Why are those supposed princes making that darling girl march in place ad nausea?* Plus she had a recital tonight and had to go fetch her tights from the dryer.

Egads! One found oneself still standing at the top of the stairs.

Do the thing where, facing upstairs, hand on railing, you hop down the stairs one at a time, which was getting a lot harder lately, due to, someone's feet were getting longer every day, seemed like.

Pas de chat, pas de chat.

Changement, changement.

Hop over thin metal thingie separating hallway tile from living-room rug.

Curtsy to self in entryway mirror.

Come on, Mom, get here. We do not wish to be castrigated by Ms. Callow again in the wings.

Although actually she loved Ms. C. So strict! Also loved the other girls in class. And the girls from school. *Loved* them. Everyone was so nice. Plus the boys at her school. Plus the teachers at her school. All of them were doing their best. Actually, she loved her whole town. That adorable grocer, spraying his lettuce! Pastor Carol, with her large comfortable butt! The chubby

postman, gesticulating with his padded envelopes! It had once been a mill town. Wasn't that crazy? What did that even mean?

Also she loved her house. Across the creek was the Russian church. So ethnic! That onion dome had loomed in her window since her Pooh footie days. Also loved Gladsong Drive. Every house on Gladsong was a Corona del Mar. That was amazing! If you had a friend on Gladsong, you already knew where everything was in his or her home.

Jeté, jeté, rond de jambe.

Pas de bourrée.

On a happy whim, do front roll, hop to your feet, kiss the picture of Mom and Dad taken at Penney's back in the Stone Ages, when you were that little cutie right there {kiss} with a hair bow bigger than all outdoors.

Sometimes, feeling happy like this, she imagined a baby deer trembling in the woods.

Where's your mama, little guy?

I don't know, the deer said in the voice of Heather's little sister Becca.

Are you afraid? she asked it. Are you hungry? Do you want me to hold you?

Okay, the baby deer said.

Here came the hunter now, dragging the deer's mother by the antlers. Her guts were completely splayed. Jeez, that was nice! She covered the baby's eyes and was like, Don't you have anything better to do, dank hunter, than kill this baby's mom? You seem like a nice enough guy.

Is my mom killed? The baby said in Becca's voice.

No, no, she said. This gentleman was just leaving.

The hunter, captivated by her beauty, toffed or doffed his cap, and, going down on one knee, Said, If I could will life back into this fawn, I would do so, in hopes you might defer one tender kiss upon our elderly forehead.

Go, she said. Only, for your task of penance do not eat her. Lay her out in a field of clover, with roses strewn about her. And bestow a choir, to softly sing of her foul end.

Lay who out? the baby deer said.

No one, she said. Never mind. Stop asking so many questions.

Pas de chat, pas de chat.

Changement, changement.

She felt hopeful that {special one} would hail from far away. The local boys possessed a certain *je ne said quoi,* which, tell the truth, she was not *très* crazy about, such as: actually named their own nuts. She had overhead that! And aspired to work for Country Power because the work shirts were awesome and you got them free.

So ixnay on the local boys. A special ixnay on Matt Drey, owner of the largest mouth in the land. Kissing him last night at the pep rally had been like kissing an underpass. Scary! Kissing Matt was like suddenly this cow in a sweater is bearing down on you, who will not take no for an answer, and

his huge cow head is being flooded by chemicals that are drowning out what little powers of reason Matt actually did have.

What she liked was being in charge of her. Her body, her mind. Her thoughts, her career, her future.

That was what she liked.

So be it.

We might have a slight snack.

Un Petit repas.

Was she special? Did she consider herself special? Oh, gosh, she didn't know. In the history of the world many had been more special than her. Helen Keller had been awesome; Mother Teresa was amazing, Mrs. Roosevelt was quite chipper in spite of her husband, who was handicapped, which, in addition, she had been gay, with those big old teeth, long before such time as being gay and First Lady was even conceptual. She, Alison, could not hope to compete in the category of those ladies. Not yet, anyway!

There was so much she didn't know! Like how to change the oil. Or even check the oil. How to open the hood. How to bake brownies. That was embarrassing, actually, being a girl and all. And what was a mortgage? Did it come with the house? When you breast-fed, did you have to like push the milk out?

Egads. Who was this wan figure, visible through the living-room window, trotting up Gladsong Drive? Kyle Boot, palest kid in all the land? Still dressed in his weird cross-country-running toggles?

Poor thing. He looked like a skeleton with a mullet. Were those cross-country shorts from the like *Charlie's Angels* days or *quoi*? How could he run so well when he seemed to have literally no muscles? Every day he ran home like this, shirtless with his backpack on, then hit the remote from down by the Fungs' and scooted into his garage without breaking stride.

You almost had to admire the poor goof.

They'd grown up together, been little beaners in that mutual sandbox down by the creek. Hadn't they bathed together when wee or some such crud? She hoped that never got out. Because in terms of friends, Kyle was basically down to Feddy Slavko, who walked leaning way backward and was always retrieving things from between his teeth, announcing the name of the retrieved thing in Greek, then re-eating it. Kyle's mom and dad didn't let him do squat. He had to call home if the movie in World Culture might show bare boobs. Each of the items in his lunch box was clearly labeled.

Pas de bourrée.

And curtsy.

Pour quantity of Cheez Doodles into compartmentalized old-school Tupperware dealie.

Thanks, Mom, thanks, Dad. Your kitchen *rocks*.

Shake Tupperware dealie back and forth like panning for gold, then offer to some imaginary poor gathered round.

Please enjoy. Is there anything else I can do for you folks?

You have already done enough, Alison, by even deigning to speak to us.

That is so not true! Don't you understand, all people deserve respect? Each of us is a rainbow.

Uh, really? Look at this big open sore on my poor shriveled flank.

Allow me to fetch you some Vaseline.

That would be much appreciated. This thing kills.

But as far as that rainbow idea? She believed that. People were amazing. Mom was awesome, Dad was awesome, her teachers worked so hard and had kids of their own, and some were even getting divorced, such as Mrs. Dees, but still always took time for their students. What she found especially inspiring about Mrs. Dees was that, even though Mr. Dees was cheating on Mrs. Dees with the lady who ran the bowling alley, Mrs. Dees was still teaching the best course ever in Ethics, posing such questions as: Can goodness win? Or do good people always get shafted, evil being more reckless? That last bit seemed to be Mrs. Dees taking a shot at the bowling-alley gal. But seriously! Is life fun or scary? Are people good or bad? On the one hand, that clip of those gauntish pale bodies being steamrolled while fat German ladies looked on chomping gum. On the other hand, sometimes rural folks, even if their particular farms were on hills, stayed up late filling sandbags.

In their straw poll she had voted for people being good and life being fun, with Mrs. Dees giving her a pitying glance as she stated her views: To do good, you just have to decide to do good. You have to be brave. You have to stand up for what's right. At that last, Mrs. Dees had made this kind of groan. Which was fine. Mrs. Dees had a lot of pain in her life, yet, interestingly? Still obviously found something fun about life and good about people, because otherwise why sometimes stay up so late grading you come in next day all exhausted, blouse on backward, having messed it up in the early-morning dark, you dear discombobulated thing?

Here came a knock on the door. Back door. In-ter-est-ing. Who could it be? Father Dmitri from across the way? UPS? FedEx? With *un petit* check *pour Papa*?

Jeté, jeté, rond de jambe.

Pas de bourrée.

Open door, and—

Here was a man she did not know. Quite huge fellow, in one of those meter-reader vests.

Something told her to step back in, slam the door. But that seemed rude.

Instead she froze, smiled, did {eyebrow raise} to indicate: May I help you?

Kyle Boot dashed through the garage, into the living area, where the big clock-like wooden indicator was set at All Out. Other choices included: Mom & Dad

Out; Mom Out; Dad Out; Kyle Out; Mom & Kyle Out; Dad & Kyle Out; and All In.

Why did they even need All In? Wouldn't they know it when they were All In? Would he like to ask Dad that? Who, in his excellent totally silent downstairs woodshop, had designed and built the Family Status Indicator?

Ha.

Ha ha.

On the kitchen island was a Work Notice.

> Scout: New geode on deck. Place in yard per included drawing. No goofing. Rake areas first, put down plastic as I have shown you. Then lay in white rock. THIS GEODE EXPENSIVE. Pls take seriously. No reason this should not be done by time I get home. This = five (5) Work Points.

Gar, Dad, do you honestly feel it fair that I should have to slave in the yard until dark after a rigorous cross-country practice that included sixteen 440s, eight 880s, a mile-for-time, a kajillion Drake sprints, and a five-mile Indian relay?

Shoes off, mister.

Yoinks, too late. He was already at the TV. And had left an incriminating trail of microclods. Way verboten. Could the microclods be hand-plucked? Although, problem: if he went back to hand-pluck the microclods, he'd leave an incriminating new trail of microclods.

He took off his shoes and stood mentally rehearsing a little show he liked to call WHAT IF ... RIGHT NOW?

WHAT IF they came home RIGHT NOW?

It's funny story, Dad! I came in thoughlessly! Then realized what I'd done! I guess, when I think about it, what I'm happy about? Is how quickly I self-corrected! The reason I came in so thoughtlessly was, I wanted to get right to work, Dad, per your note!

He raced in his socks to the garage, threw his shoes into the garage, ran for the vacuum, vacuumed up the microclods, then realized, holy golly, he had thrown his shoes into the garage rather than placing them on the Shoe Sheet as required, toes facing away from the door for ease of donnage later.

He stepped into the garage, placed his shoes on the Shoe Sheet, stepped back inside.

Scout, Dad said in his head, has anyone ever told you that even the most neatly maintained garage is going to have some oil on its floor, which is now on your socks, being tracked all over the tan Berber?

Oh gar, his ass was grass.

But no—*celebrate good times, come on*—no oil stain on rug.

He tore off his socks. It was absolutely verboten for him to be in the main living area barefoot. Mom and Dad coming home to find him Tarzaning around like some sort of white trasher would not be the least fucking bit—

Swearing in your head? Dad said in his head. Step up, Scout, be a man. If you want to swear, swear aloud.

I don't want to swear aloud.

Then don't swear in your head.

Mom and Dad would be heartsick if they could hear the swearing he sometimes did in his head, such as crap-cunt shit-turd dick-in-the-ear butt-creamery. Why couldn't he stop doing that? They thought so highly of him, sending weekly braggy emails to both sets of grandparents, such as: Kyle's been super-busy keeping up his grades while running varsity cross-country though still a sophomore, while setting aside a little time each day to manufacture such humdingers as cunt-swoggle rear-fuck—

What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he be grateful for all that Mom and Dad did for him, instead of—

Cornhole the ear-cunt.

Flake-fuck the pale vestige with a proddering dick-knee.

You could always clear the mind with a hard pinch on your own minimal love handle.

Ouch.

Hey, today was Tuesday, a Major Treat day. The five (5) new Work Points for placing the geode, plus his existing two (2) Work Points, totaled seven (7) Work Points, which, added to his eight (8) accrued Usual Chore Points, made fifteen (15) Total Treat Points, which could garner him a Major Treat (for example, two handfuls of yogurt-covered raisins) plus twenty free-choice TV minutes, although the particular show would have to be negotiated with Dad at time of cash-in.

One thing you will not be watching, Scout, is *America's Most Outspoken Dirt Bikers*.

Whatever.

Whatever, Dad.

Really, Scout? "Whatever"? Will it be "whatever" when I take away all your Treat Points and force you to quit cross-country, as I have several times threatened to do if a little more cheerful obedience wasn't forthcoming?

No, no, no. I don't want to quit, Dad. Please. I'm good at it. You'll see, first meet. Even Matt Drey said—

Who is Matt Drey? Some ape on the football team?

Yes.

Is his word law?

No.

What did he say?

Little shit can run.

Nice talk, Scout. Ape talk. Anyway, you may not make it to the first meet. Your ego seems to be overflowing its banks. And why? Because you can jog? Anyone can jog. Beasts of the field can jog.

I'm not quitting! Anal-cock shit-bird rectum-fritz! Please, I'm begging you, it's the only thing I'm decent at! Mom, if he makes me quit I swear to God I'll—

Drama doesn't suit you, Beloved Only.

If you want the privilege of competing in a team sport, Scout, show us that you can live within our perfectly reasonable system of directives designed to benefit you.

Hello.

A van had just pulled up in the St. Mikhail's parking lot.

Kyle walked in a controlled, gentlemanly manner to the kitchen counter. On the counter was Kyle's Traffic Log, which served the dual purpose of (1) buttressing Dad's argument that Father Dmitri should build a soundproof retaining wall and (2) constituting a data set for a possible Science Fair project for him, Kyle, entitled, by Dad, "Correlation of Church Parking Lot Volume vs. Day of Week, with Ancillary Investigation of Sunday Volume Throughout Year."

Smiling agreeably as if he enjoyed filling out the Log, Kyle very legibly filled out the Log:

Vehicle: VAN.
Color: GRAY.
Make: CHEVY.
Year: UNKNOWN.

A guy got out of the van. One of the usual Rooskies. "Rooskie" was an allowed slang. Also "dang it." Also "holy golly." Also "crapper." The Rooskie was wearing a jean jacket over a hoodie, which, in Kyle's experience, was not unusual church-wear for the Rooskies, who sometimes came directly over from Jiffy Lube still wearing coveralls.

Under "Vehicle Driver" he wrote, PROBABLE PARISHIONER.

That sucked. Stank, rather. The guy being a stranger, he, Kyle, now had to stay inside until the stranger left the neighborhood. Which totally futzed up his geode placing. He'd be out there until midnight. What a detriment!

The guy put on a Day Glo-vest. Ah, dude was a meter reader.

The meter reader looked left, then right, leaped across the creek, entered the Pope backyard, passed between the soccer-ball rebounder and the in-ground pool, then knocked on the Pope door.

Good leap there, Boris.

The door swung open.

Alison.

Kyle's heart was singing. He'd always thought that was just a phrase. Alison was like a national treasure. In the dictionary under "beauty" there should be a picture of her in that jean skort. Although lately she didn't seem to like him all that much.

Now she stepped across her deck so the meter reader could show her something. Something electrical wrong on the roof? The guy seemed eager to show her. Actually, he had her by the wrist. And was like tugging.

That was weird. Wasn't it? Something had never been weird around here before. So probably it was fine. Probably the guy was just a really new meter reader?

Somehow Kyle felt like stepping out onto the deck. He stepped out. The guy froze. Alison's eyes were scared-horse eyes. The guy cleared his throat, turned slightly to let Kyle see something.

A knife.

The meter reader had a knife.

Here's what you're doing, the guy said. Standing right there until we leave. Move a muscle, I knife her in the heart. Swear to God. Got it?

Kyle's mouth was so spitless all he could do was make his mouth do the shape it normally did when saying Yes.

Now they were crossing the yard. Alison threw herself to the ground. The guy hauled her up. She threw herself down. He hauled her up. It was odd seeing Alison tossed like a rag doll in the sanctuary of the perfect yard her dad had made for her. She threw herself down.

The guy hissed something and she rose, suddenly docile.

In his chest Kyle felt the many directives, Major and Minor, he was right now violating. He was on the deck shoeless, on the deck shirtless, was outside when a stranger was near, had engaged with that stranger.

Last week Sean Ball had brought a wig to school to more effectively mimic the way Bev Mirren chewed her hair when nervous. Kyle had briefly considered intervening. At Evening Meeting, Mom had said that she considered Kyle's decision not to intervene judicious. Dad had said, That was none of your business. You could have been badly hurt. Mom had said, Think of all the resources we've invested in you, Beloved Only. Dad had said, I know we sometimes strike you as strict but you are literally all we have.

They were at the soccer-ball rebounder now, Alison's arm up behind her back. She was making a low repetitive sound of denial, like she was trying to invent a noise that would adequately communicate her feelings about what she'd just this instant realized was going to happen to her.

He was just a kid. There was nothing he could do. In his chest he felt the lush release of pressure that always resulted when he submitted to a directive. There at his feet was the geode. He should just look at that until they left. It was a great one. Maybe the greatest one ever. The crystals at the cutaway glistened in the sun. It would look nice in the yard. Once he placed it. He'd place it once they were gone. Dad would be impressed that even after what had occurred he'd remembered to place the geode.

That's the ticket, Scout.

We are well pleased, Beloved Only.

Super job, Scout.

Holy crap. It was happening. She was marching along all meek like the trouper he'd known she'd be. He'd had her in mind since the baptism of what's-his-name. Sergei's kid. At the Russian church. She'd been standing in her yard, her dad or some such taking her picture.

He'd been like, Hello, Betty.

Kenny had been like, Little young, bro.

He'd been like, For you, grandpa.

When you studied history, the history of cultures, you saw your own individual time as hidebound. There were various theories of acquiescence. In Bible days a king might ride through a field and go: That one. And she would be brought unto him. And they would duly be betrothed and if she gave birth unto a son, super, bring out the streamers, she was a keeper. Was she, that first night, digging it? Probably not. Was she shaking like a leaf? Didn't matter. What mattered was offspring and the furtherance of the lineage. Plus the exaltation of the king, which resulted in righteous kingly power.

Here was the creek.

He marched her through.

The following bullet points remained in the decision matrix: take to side van door, shove in, follow in, tape wrists/mouth, hook to chain, make speech. He had the speech down cold. Had practiced it both in his head and on the recorder: *Calm your heart, darling, I know you're scared because you don't know me yet and didn't expect this today but give me a chance and you will see we will fly high. See I am putting the knife right over here and I don't expect I'll have to use it, right?*

If she wouldn't get in the van, punch hard in gut. Then pick up, carry to side van door, throw in, tape wrists/mouth, hook to chain, make speech, etc., etc.

Stop, pause, he said.

Gal stopped.

Fucksake. Side door of the van was locked. How undisciplined was that. Ensuring that the door was unlocked was clearly indicated on the premission matrix. Melvin appeared in his mind. On Melvin's face was the look of hot disappointment that had always preceded an ass whooping, which had always preceded the other thing. Put up your hands, Melvin said, defend yourself.

True, true. Little error there. Should have double-checked the premission matrix.

No biggie.

Joy not fear.

Melvin was dead fifteen years. Mom dead twelve.

Little bitch was turned around now, looking back at the house. That willfulness wouldn't stand. That was going to get nipped in the bud. He'd have to remember to hurt her early, establish a baseline.

Turn the fuck around, he said.

She turned around.

He unlocked the door, swung it open. Moment of truth. If she got in, let him use the tape, they were home free. He'd picked out a place in Sackett, big-ass cornfield, dirt road leading in. If fuckwise it went good they'd pick up the freeway from there. Basically steal the van. It was Kenny's van. He'd borrowed it for the day. Screw Kenny. Kenny had once called him stupid. Too bad, Kenny, that remark just cost you one van. If fuckwise it went bad, she didn't properly arouse him, he'd abort the activity, truncate the subject, heave the thing out, clean van as necessary, go buy corn, return van to Kenny, say, Hey, bro, here's a shitload of corn, thanks for the van, I never could've bought a suitable quantity of corn in my car. Then lay low, watch the papers like he'd done with the nonarousing redhead out in—

Gal gave him an imploring look, like, Please don't.

Was this a good time? To give her one in the gut, knock the wind out of her sails?

It was.

He did.

The geode was beautiful. What a beautiful geode. What made it beautiful? What were the principal characteristics of a beautiful geode? Come on, think. Come on, concentrate.

She'll recover in time, Beloved Only.

None of our affair, Scout.

We're amazed by your good judgment, Beloved Only.

Dimly he noted that Alison had been punched. Eyes on the geode, he heard the little *oof*.

His heart dropped at the thought of what he was letting happen. They'd used goldfish snacks as coins. They'd made bridges out of rocks. Down by the creek. Back in the day. Oh God. He should've never stepped outside. Once they were gone he'd just go back inside, pretend he'd never stepped out, make the model-railroad town, still be making it when Mom and Dad got home. When eventually someone told him about it? He'd make a certain face. Already on his face he could feel the face he would make, like, What? Alison? Raped? Killed? Oh God. Raped and killed while I innocently made my railroad town, sitting cross-legged and unaware on the floor like a tiny little—

No. No, no, no. They'd be gone soon. Then he could go inside. Call 911. Although then everyone would know he'd done nothing. All his future life would be bad. Forever he'd be the guy who'd done nothing. Besides, calling wouldn't do any good. They'd be long gone. The parkway was just across

Featherstone, with like a million arteries and cloverleafs or whatever spouting out of it. So that was that. In he'd go. As soon as they left. Leave, leave, leave, he thought, so I can go inside, forget this ever—

Then he was running. Across the lawn. Oh God! What was he doing, what was he doing? Jesus, shit, the directives he was violating! Running in the yard (bad for the sod); transporting a geode without its protective wrapping; hopping the fence, which stressed the fence, which had cost a pretty penny; leaving the yard; leaving the yard barefoot; entering the Secondary Area without permission; entering the creek barefoot (broken glass, dangerous microorganisms), and, not only that, oh God, suddenly he saw what this giddy part of himself intended, which was to violate a directive so Major and absolute that it wasn't even a directive, since you didn't need a directive to know how totally verboten it was to—

He burst out of the creek, the guy still not turning, and let the geode fly into his head, which seemed to emit a weird edge-seep of blood even before the skull visibly indented and the guy sat right on his ass.

Yes! Score! It was fun! Fun dominating a grown-up! Fun using the most dazzling gazelle-like leg speed ever seen in the history of mankind to dash soundlessly across space and master this huge galoot, who otherwise, right now, would be—

What if he hadn't?

God, what if he hadn't?

He imagined the guy bending Alison in two like a pale garment bag while pulling her hair and thrusting bluntly, as he, Kyle, sat cowed and obedient, tiny railroad viaduct grasped in his pathetic babyish—

Jesus! He skipped over and hurled the geode through the windshield of the van, which imploded, producing an inward rain of glass shards that made the sound of thousands of tiny bamboo wind chimes.

He scrambled up the hood of the van, retrieved the geode.

Really? Really? You were going to ruin her life, ruin my life, you cunt-probe dick-munch ass-gashing Animal? Who's bossing who now? Gash-ass, jizz-lips, turd-munch—

He'd never felt so strong/angry/wild. Who's the man? Who's your daddy? What else must he do? To ensure that Animal did no further harm? You still moving, freak? Got a plan, stroke-dick? Want a skull gash on top of your existing skull gash, big man? You think I won't? You think I—

Easy, Scout, you're out of control.

Slow your motor down, Beloved Only.

Quiet. I'm the boss of me.

FUCK!

What the hell? What was he doing on the ground? Had he tripped? Did someone wonk him? Did a branch fall? God damn. He touched his head. His hand came away bloody.

The beanpole kid was bending. To pick something up. A rock. Why was that kid off the porch? Where was the knife?

Where was the gal?

Crab-crawling toward the creek.

Flying across her yard.

Going into her house.

Fuck it, everything was fucked. Better hit the road. With what, his good looks? He had like eight bucks total.

Ah Christ! The kid had smashed the windshield! With the rock! Kenny was not going to like that one bit.

He tried to stand but couldn't. The blood was just pouring out. He was not going to jail again. No way. He'd slit his wrists. Where was the knife? He'd stab himself in the chest. That had nobility. Then the people would know his name. Which of them had the balls to samurai themselves with a knife in the chest?

None.

Nobody.

Go ahead, pussy. Do it.

No. The king does not take his own life. The superior man silently accepts the mindless rebuke of the rabble. Waits to rise and fight anew. Plus he had no idea where the knife was. Well, he didn't need it. He'd crawl into the woods, kill something with his bare hands. Or make a trap from some grass. Ugh. Was he going to barf? There, he had. Right on his lap.

Figures you'd blow the simplest thing, Melvin said.

Melvin, God, can't you see my head is bleeding so bad?

A kid did it to you. You're a joke. You got fucked by a kid.

Oh, sirens, perfect.

Well, it was a sad day for the cops. He'd fight them hand to hand. He'd sit until the last moment, watching them draw near, doing a silent death mantra that would centralize all his life power in his fists.

He sat thinking about his fists. They were huge granite boulders. They were a pit bull each. He tried to get up. Somehow his legs weren't working. He hoped the cops would get here soon. His head really hurt. When he touched up there, things moved. It was like he was wearing a gore cap. He was going to need a bunch of stitches. He hoped it wouldn't hurt too much. Probably it would, though.

Where was that beanpole kid?

Oh, here he was.

Looming over him, blocking out the sun, rock held high, yelling something, but he couldn't tell what, because of the ringing in his ears.

Then he saw that the kid was going to bring the rock down. He closed his eyes and waited and was not at peace at all but instead felt the beginnings of

a terrible dread welling up inside him, and if that dread kept growing at the current rate, he realized in a flash of insight, there was a name for the place he would be then, and it was Hell.

Alison stood at the kitchen window. She'd peed herself. Which was fine. People did that. When super-scared. She'd noticed it while making the call. Her hands had been shaking so bad. They still were. One leg was doing that Thumper thing. God, the stuff he'd said to her. He'd punched her. He'd pinched her. There was a big blue mark on her arm. How could Kyle still be out there? But there he was, in those comical shorts, so confident he was goofing around, hands clenched over his head like a boxer from some cute alt universe where a kid that skinny could actually win a fight against a guy with a knife.

Wait.

His hands weren't clenched. He was holding the rock, shouting something down at the guy, who was on his knees, like the blindfolded prisoner in that video they'd seen in History, about to get sword-killed by a formal dude in a helmet.

Kyle, don't, she whispered.

For months afterward she had nightmares in which Kyle brought the rock down. She was on the deck trying to scream his name but nothing was coming out. Down came the rock. Then the guy had no head. The blow just literally dissolved his head. Then his body tumped over and Kyle turned to her with this heartbroken look of, My life is over. I killed a guy.

Why was it, she sometimes wondered, that in dreams we can't do the simplest things? Like a crying puppy is standing on some broken glass and you want to pick it up and brush the shards off its pads but you can't because you're balancing a ball on your head. Or you're driving and there's this old guy on crutches, and you go, to Mr. Feder, your Driver's Ed teacher, Should I swerve? And he's like, Uh, probably. But then you hear this big clunk and Feder makes a negative mark in his book.

Sometimes she'd wake up crying from the dream about Kyle. The last time, Mom and Dad were already there, going, That's not how it was. Remember, Allie? How did it happen? Say it. Say it out loud. Allie, can you tell Mommy and Daddy how it really happened?

I ran outside, she said. I shouted.

That's right, Dad said. You shouted. Shouted like a champ.

And what did Kyle do? Mom said.

Put down the rock, she said.

A bad thing happened to you kids, Dad said. But it could have been worse.

So much worse, Mom said.

But because of you kids, Dad said, it wasn't.
You did so good, Mom said.
Did beautiful, Dad said.

TRY THIS 3.11
Write an anecdote in three paragraphs. Let each paragraph be told by a different character in the story.

JORGE LUIS BORGES

The Book of Sand

...thy rope of sands...
George Herbert (1593–1623)

The line consists of an infinite number of points; the plane, of an infinite number of lines; the volume, of an infinite number of planes; the hypervolume, of an infinite number of volumes... No—this, *more geometrico*, is decidedly not the best way to begin my tale. To say that the story is true is by now a convention of every fantastic tale; mine, nevertheless, *is* true.

I live alone, in a fifth-floor apartment on Calle Belgrano. One evening a few months ago, I heard a knock at my door. I opened it, and a stranger stepped in. He was a tall man, with blurred, vague features, or perhaps my nearsightedness made me see him that way. Everything about him spoke of honest poverty: he was dressed in gray, and carried a gray valise. I immediately sensed that he was a foreigner. At first I thought he was old; then I noticed that I had been misled by his sparse hair, which was blond, almost white, like the Scandinavians'. In the course of our conversation, which I doubt lasted more than an hour, I learned that he hailed from the Orkneys.

I pointed the man to a chair. He took some time to begin talking. He gave off an air of melancholy, as I myself do now.

"I sell Bibles," he said at last.

5 "In this house," I replied, not without a somewhat stiff, pedantic note, "there are several English Bibles, including the first one, Wyclif's. I also have Cipriano de Valera's, Luther's (which is, in literary terms, the worst of the lot), and a Latin copy of the Vulgate. As you see, it isn't exactly Bibles I might be needing."

After a brief silence he replied.

"It's not only Bibles I sell. I can show you a sacred book that might interest a man such as yourself. I came by it in northern India, in Bikaner."

He opened his valise and brought out the book. He laid it on the table. It was a clothbound octavo volume that had clearly passed through many

hands. I examined it; the unusual heft of it surprised me. On the spine was printed *Holy Writ*, and then *Bombay*.

"Nineteenth century, I'd say," I observed.

"I don't know," was the reply. "Never did know."

I opened it at random. The characters were unfamiliar to me. The pages, which seemed worn and badly set, were printed in double columns, like a Bible. The text was cramped, and composed into versicles. At the upper corner of each page were Arabic numerals. I was struck by an odd fact: the even-numbered page would carry the number 40,514, let us say, while the odd-numbered page that followed it would be 999. I turned the page; the next page bore an eight-digit number. It also bore a small illustration, like those one sees in dictionaries: an anchor drawn in pen and ink, as though by the unskilled hand of a child.

It was at that point that the stranger spoke again.

"Look at it well. You will never see it again."

There was a threat in the words, but not in the voice.

I took note of the page, and then closed the book. Immediately I opened it again. In vain I searched for the figure of the anchor, page after page. To hide my discomfiture, I tried another tack.

"This is a version of Scripture in some Hindu language, isn't that right?"

"No," he replied.

Then he lowered his voice, as though entrusting me with a secret.

"I came across this book in a village on the plain, and I traded a few rupees and a Bible for it. The man who owned it didn't know how to read. I suspect he saw the Book of Books as an amulet. He was of the lowest caste; people could not so much as step on his shadow without being defiled. He told me his book was called the Book of Sand because neither sand nor this book has a beginning or an end."

He suggested I try to find the first page.

I took the cover in my left hand and opened the book, my thumb and forefinger almost touching. It was impossible: several pages always lay between the cover and my hand. It was as though they grew from the very book.

"Now try to find the end."

I failed there as well.

"This can't be," I stammered, my voice hardly recognizable as my own.

"It can't be, yet it *is*," The Bible peddler said, his voice little more than a whisper. "The number of pages in this book is literally infinite. No page is the first page; no page is the last. I don't know why they're numbered in this arbitrary way, but perhaps it's to give one to understand that the terms of an infinite series can be numbered any way whatever."

Then, as though thinking out loud, he went on.

"If space is infinite, we are anywhere, at any point in space. If time is infinite, we are at any point in time."

His musings irritated me.

"You," I said, "are a religious man, are you not?"

"Yes, I'm Presbyterian. My conscience is clear. I am certain I didn't cheat that native when I gave him the Lord's Word in exchange for his diabolic book."

I assured him he had nothing to reproach himself for, and asked whether he was just passing through the country. He replied that he planned to return to his own country within a few days. It was then that I learned he was a Scot, and that his home was in the Orkneys. I told him I had great personal fondness for Scotland because of my love for Stevenson and Hume.

"And Robbie Burns," he corrected.

As we talked I continued to explore the infinite book.

"Had you intended to offer this curious specimen to the British Museum, then?" I asked with feigned indifference.

"No," he replied, "I am offering it to you," and he mentioned a great sum of money.

I told him, with perfect honesty, that such an amount of money was not within my ability to pay. But my mind was working; in a few moments I had devised my plan.

"I propose a trade," I said. "You purchased the volume with a few rupees and the Holy Scripture; I will offer you the full sum of my pension, which I have just received, and Wyclif's black-letter Bible. It was left to me by my parents."

"A black-letter Wyclif!" he murmured.

I went to my bedroom and brought back the money and the book. With a bibliophile's zeal he turned the pages and studied the binding.

"Done," he said.

I was astonished that he did not haggle. Only later was I to realize that he had entered my house already determined to sell the book. He did not count the money, but merely put the bills into his pocket.

We chatted about India, the Orkneys, and the Norwegian jarls that had once ruled those islands. Night was falling when the man left. I have never seen him since, nor do I know his name.

I thought of putting the Book of Sand in the space left by the Wyclif, but I chose at last to hide it behind some imperfect volumes of the *Thousand and One Nights*.

I went to bed but could not sleep. At three or four in the morning I turned on the light. I took out the impossible book and turned its pages. On one, I saw an engraving of a mask. There was a number in the corner of the page—I don't remember now what it was—raised to the ninth power.

I showed no one my treasure. To the joy of possession was added the fear that it would be stolen from me, and to that, the suspicion that it might not be truly infinite. Those two points of anxiety aggravated my already habitual

misanthropy. I had but few friends left, and those, I stopped seeing. A prisoner of the Book, I hardly left my house. I examined the worn binding and the covers with a magnifying glass, and rejected the possibility of some artifice. I found that the small illustrations were spaced at two-thousand-page intervals. I began noting them down in an alphabetized notebook, which was very soon filled. They never repeated themselves. At night, during the rare intervals spared me by insomnia, I dreamed of the book.

Summer was drawing to a close, and I realized that the book was monstrous. It was cold consolation to think that I, who looked upon it with my eyes and fondled it with my ten flesh-and-bone fingers, was no less monstrous than the book. I felt it was a nightmare thing, an obscene thing, and that it defiled and corrupted reality.

I considered fire, but I feared that the burning of an infinite book might be similarly infinite, and suffocate the planet in smoke.

I remembered reading once that the best place to hide a leaf is in the forest. Before my retirement I had worked in the National Library, which contained nine hundred thousand books; I knew that to the right of the lobby a curving staircase descended into the shadows of the basement, where the maps and periodicals are kept. I took advantage of the librarians' distraction to hide the Book of Sand on one of the library's damp shelves; I tried not to notice how high up, or how far from the door.

I now feel a little better, but I refuse even to walk down the street the library's on.

TRY THIS 3.12
Pick an incident from your life. In one page, recount it in the language of either a teenager or a kidnapper. In another page, recount it in the voice of either a cultivated collector of books or a preacher.

POEMS

ALICIA OSTRIKER

Wrong About the Horse

The old woman felt sorry for herself
and angry at herself at the same time
many betrayals had afflicted her
she carried grudges
in her throat

that paralyzed speech
and prevented forgiveness

Unlike you who fear betrayal
I live my whole lifetime
In the open air and in the azure present moment
like a butterfly or gnat or horse
said the red tulip
I burden myself with no expectations
therefore I can never be betrayed

Unlike both of you
said the dog
I consider fierce competition essential to life
among dogs rivalry is not betrayal
it is energy, leaping and fanged energy
that makes a top dog
and you are wrong about the horse

TRY THIS 3.13
Write from the point of view of anything not human—an insect, an android, a potato, a belly button. Try to invent and develop a diction that represents the frame of reference of this thing. For instance, if you are writing from the point of view of a shoe, it is likely to have extensive knowledge of and opinions about flooring, but a limited concept of the sky or human heads.

BARBARA HAMBY

Ode to American English

I was missing English one day, American, really,
with its pill-popping Hungarian goulash of everything
from Anglo-Saxon to Zulu, because British English
is not the same, if the paperback dictionary
I bought at Brentano's on the Avenue de l'Opéra
is any indication, too cultured by half. Oh, the English
know their dahlias, but what about doowop, donuts,
Dick Tracy, Tricky Dick? With their elegant Oxfordian
accents, how could they understand my yearning for the hotrod,
hotdog, hot flash vocabulary of the U. S. of A.,
the fragmented fandango of Dagwood's everyday flattening
of Mr. Beasley on the sidewalk, fetuses floating

on billboards, drive-by monster hip-hop stereos shaking
the windows of my dining room like a 7.5 earthquake,
Ebonics, Spanglish, "you know" used as comma and period,
the inability of 90% of the population to get the present perfect:
I have went, I have saw, I have tooken Jesus into my heart,
the battle cry of the Bible Belt, but no one uses
the King James anymore, only plain-speak versions,
in which Jesus, raising Lazarus from the dead, says,
"Dude, wake up," and the L-man bolts up like a B-movie
mummy. "Whoa, I was toasted." Yes, ma'am,
I miss the mongrel plentitude of American English, its fall-guy,
rat-terrier, dog-pound neologisms, the bomb of it all,
the rushing River Jordan backwoods mutability of it, the low-rider,
boom-box cruise of it, from New Joisey to Ha-wah-ya
with its sly dog, malasada-scarfing beach blanket lingo
to the ubiquitous Valley Girl's *like-like* stuttering,
shopaholic rant. I miss its quotidian beauty, its querulous
back-biting righteous indignation, its preening rotgut
flag-waving cowardice. *Suffering Succotash*, sputters
Sylvester the Cat, *sine die*, say the pork-bellied legislators
of the swamps and plains. I miss all those guys, their Tweety-bird
resilience, their Doris Day optimism, the candid unguent
of utter unhappiness on every channel, the midnight televangelist
euphoric stew, the junk mail, voice mail vernacular.
On every *boulevard* and *rue* I miss the Tarzan cry of Johnny
Weismueller, Johnny Cash, Johnny B. Goode,
and all the smart-talking, gum-snapping hard-girl dialogue,
finger-popping x-rated street talk, sports babble,
Cheetoes, Cheerios, chili dog diatribes. Yeah, I miss them all,
sitting here on my sidewalk throne sipping champagne
verses lined up like hearses, metaphors juking, nouns zipping
in my head like Corvettes on Dexedrine, French verbs
slitting my throat, yearning for James Dean to jump my curb.

TRY THIS 3.14

An **ode** is a serious, meditative lyric poem that treats a noble subject in a dignified manner. Write an ode to something hip, pop, trivial, or trashy that you really love.

LYRICS BY ADAM J. RUBEN

The Grad Student Rap (Excerpts)

I'm a free-pen thief and a free-food eater.
You should see the size of my curriculum vita.
Among grad students, I'm the baddest dude.
My classmates like me—
Yeah, we've been peer reviewed.

(Chorus)
I'm a grad student
In a community of scholars.
I'm a grad student.
I make dozens of dollars!
I'm a grad student.
And I'm sure you'll agree
That's why they're givin' me the third degree.

It's a sad and cruel existence,
Goin' to class as teaching assistants.
The college kids all disrespect us,
I got no prospects, just my propectus.
We try to teach 'em to search print media,
But they all just copy Wikipedia.

Takin' student loans just to have some money.
Payin' them off 'til my kids are 20.
Every passing day makes me afraid.
Hey, just think of this as 23rd grade.
Without caffeine, I feel destroyed,
It's my favorite xanthine alkaloid.
After 12 years here, I'm a bit embittered.
Yo, crank that up! That's "All Things Considered!"

Yeah, I'm a nickel-saving, never-shaving,
Bagel-stealing, shame-concealing
Sunlight-hating, annotating,
Prob'ly never graduating,
Hardly caring, flash-drive-wearing.
Moron-teaching, microfiching,
Early-rising, harmonizing.
Never, ever unionizing,

Crap-enduring, debt-incurring,
Overnighting, thesis-writing,
Data-mining, constant-whining,
I can't see the silver lining,
Paper-grading, tax-evading,
Uninspired, very tired,
Snipin', gripin', always typin',
Please don't take away my stipend
Grad student.
If I try to stay mellow,
I can start my career—as a postdoctoral fellow.

DRAMA

CHUCK O'CONNOR

High Hard Ones

Cast List:

Hank Greenberg (27 years old)—An All-Star baseball player for the Detroit Tigers who is on the verge of breaking the Major League Baseball Record held by Babe Ruth

Abe Sperling, "Uncle Abe" (55 years old)—A bookmaker and associate to the "Purple Gang" (the Detroit Jewish Mafia) who is a family friend and "Uncle" to Hank Greenberg

Briggs Stadium, Detroit Michigan, 1938. The Detroit Tigers locker room. UNCLE ABE sits at a locker with the name plate "Greenberg." He has a baseball jersey draped over one knee and a wide brimmed black hat balanced on the other. He wears a yarmulke. HANK GREENBERG enters in boxer shorts drying off, HANK sees ABE and is angry. He begins to dress trying to ignore ABE.

ABE: You think you can wash it off.

HANK: I asked you to leave.

ABE: You can't wash it off. You're still a Jew.

HANK: I'm done arguing this.

ABE: Just because you won a baseball game on Rosh Hashanah does not make for a mitzvah.

HANK: Uncle Abe, I told you, there's nothing in our religion that says I need to sit out.

ABE: So you say.

HANK: So says the Rabbi.

ABE: A white man's newspaper polls Rabbis to absolve their token Jew because grown men distract with a game and you call this faith, you call this religion?

HANK: We're in a dogfight with the Yankees. I'm the only guy not in a slump.

ABE: Moses was a stuttering sheepherder but when Yahweh called he answered.

HANK: It's my job.

ABE: Sure and Moses could have told Jehovah it was sheering season.

HANK: Don't play that.

ABE: There'd be no Exodus, no Promised Land ...

HANK: Don't play the guilt Uncle Abe.

ABE: No Hank Greenberg.

HANK: I know what you do.

ABE: And?

HANK: You have no right to judge another person.

ABE: Next week is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, Hank. All sinners get to change.

HANK: No. I won't do that again. Look, Abe, I told you. This means something to me. This record, the homerun record, it's important to me. I'm not going to sit again.

ABE: This isn't about you. It's about your people. Sure, you want to take the Babe's 60 home runs, what you at now, 56, 57?

HANK: 58.

ABE: Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall

HANK: Don't quote the Proverbs at me. How many Jews died today in Germany, eh? And how long do you think it will take Father Coughlin to get on CBS radio tonight and talk about his international conspiracy of Jewish bankers? The man has a broadcast center not even 10 miles north of here and he speaks of Hitler as if the man were sainted. Every homerun I hit, I hit to shame these men, these small minded men who have in their head that a Jew is nothing more than a weak and deceptive Shylock. Father Coughlin can rant as much as he wants in his bigoted holy pose, but during the news-breaks they have to give the story of Hank Greenberg and how a Jew is going to break the baseball homerun record.

ABE: That does nothing. They won't let you have it. The Goyim won't let you have their record! *(Beat)* They won't pitch to you. They're walking you. *(Refers to his notebook)* And they ain't doing it with kindness neither. How many high hard ones have you seen lately? How many fastballs been thrown at your head? Through August you walked 16 percent of your plate appearances and now, in September, you're walking at a 21 percent clip. It's called hardball for a reason Hank.

HANK: I'm going to break that record no matter how hard they try to keep it from me.

ABE: Your hope is going to do you in. There is no hope, only outcomes.

HANK: Can it, Abe. I'm not one of your cynical cronies.

ABE: I worked up the odds. See? It's all here in black and white.

HANK: I'm sure you did work up the odds, Uncle Abe.

ABE: If you sit out next week for Yom Kippur you can maintain your dignity and still lose the record.

HANK: I sat out one already for you in '34. It didn't work for you then. We still won the pennant. What makes you think you will keep me from the record?

ABE: This is a religious country, Hank. Deep down they hate anyone not like them but deep down they all love God, and when they love God they get a feeling deep down that God has chosen them to be loved. You helping them win the pennant in '34 just made them feel like they were chosen. If a man decides to get holy and help them feel blessed they will recognize that he is a good Jew but, if that same man decides to rise up and take their record they will think he has taken God's love from them and that man becomes a dirty Kike.

HANK: Believe what you want. I don't have to listen to you.

ABE: It's tribal, Hank. You think these folks give a rat's ass about a Jew humiliating Hitler? The murder of Jews matters nothing to their national past-time.

HANK: It matters to me. I'm playing tomorrow and next week and all the way down the line.

HANK goes to exit

ABE: The Purple Gang wants you to sit out.

HANK stops

ABE: It isn't just me this time, like in '34. It isn't just my book. The Purple Gang said it would be a mitzvah if you would observe Yom Kippur. They need you to stop chasing the Babe's record.

HANK: I knew it. The people you crawl around with. Your gangster and loan shark pals need to protect their gambling interest. How much juice do you got in this, Uncle Abe? How much cash do you have against me?

ABE: Nothing. I laid it against them. We all did. The Purple Gang knows what it's like to be Jewish in this Goyim country. We, your people, bet they wouldn't play fair with you. Unlike you, Hank, we don't believe in talent. There's only tribalism and obligation. No one survives without a few tribal obligations. Not even a big league home run hitter. And yes I get friendly with men who make the Goyim angry, but we provide for our families and we hold our heads high, and when the Day of Atonement comes we make our restitution. That is our tribe; your people.

HANK: They aren't my people. I'm not a gangster, Uncle Abe.

ABE: Those gangsters got you to where you are.

HANK: I got me to where I am.

ABE: You think you stand alone?

HANK: I'm not in the pocket of the Purple Gang.

ABE: Yes you are.

HANK: I earn what I have. I owe them nothing

ABE: When they sent you back down to the bush leagues after your rookie year, what were you, 19, 20 years old? You played for that racist in Beaumont, Texas who was dead set not to let another Jew see the Majors. He hated you and would have let you rot on the bench. But some Mensch came down from Detroit and told that good old boy if he wanted to win he needed to play the Jewish kid. Or he could lose. His choice. *(He flips through his notebook)* And your line that year for the Beaumont Exporters, 154 out of 154 games, .290 average, 39 homeruns, and you never saw the minors again.

HANK: Violence is the only language you know.

ABE: Not violence, Hank. Atonement. Just patching up a wrong.

HANK: Call it what you want.

ABE: If you play then the Purple Gang will not be happy and somebody will have to pay. Somebody always does. With atonement, it is what it is.

HANK: ' Reason with them.

ABE: This is religion, Hank. There's no reasoning with religion.

ABE: Call the cops.

ABE: A little fat Jew is going to tell the cops that other Jews are threatening him? They'd be pleased. One less Jew in the world.

HANK: I can't do this.

ABE gets up and crosses to leave

ABE: Then don't. Like I said, sometimes you gotta face the outcomes.

HANK: Abe ... I ... I'm so close.

ABE: So was Moses when he saw the Promised Land but sometimes God's plans got nothing to do with what we want for ourselves.

HANK: Don't bring God into this.

ABE: It's the only way Hank. You bring God into this and we get off free. 58 home runs is a mighty good wallop for a Jew. That's what they'll say when you fall short and they'll remember you as a Holy Man.

HANK: This is a hard one Abe.

ABE: Holiness is. *(ABE places his hat on his head, buttons HANK'S shirt and straightens his tie then hands him his Tigers Jersey.)* If you are a good Jew and you atone, all will be well. (*Beat*) But you decide. You're no longer a boy. You've read the Torah. You're a son of the commandments. I don't need to give you another Bar Mitzvah. I need to go now and get ready for Shabbat. I'm proud of you, Hank. We all are.

ABE goes to exit. HANK calls after him, stopping him.

HANK: Uncle Abe? *(ABE stops)* I'll come by tonight and we can talk.

ABE: Good. You can say the blessing over the challah.

HANK: Okay.

ABE: Shalom Hank.

HANK: Shalom.

Pause.

HANK sits for a moment and stares at his jersey.

He then gets up and throws his jersey into the laundry hamper and exits.

Lights go down.

The End

TRY THIS 3.15

Write, quickly, a brief dialogue between two people, each of whom holds a credible moral position. If the dialogue is to be dramatic, there will be serious cost to either character's change of mind, and a chance of such change.

WORKING TOWARD A DRAFT

Take a poem or fragment of a poem you have written and recast it in the second person. Who is the "you" to whom this poem might be addressed? How does using the second person alter the meaning?

Or:

Take a passage from your journal and rewrite it in the voice of Oscar Wilde, Pocahontas, Miss Manners, Donald Trump, Donald Duck, Taylor Swift, Annie Oakley, or the Godfather. Read it aloud to your group without telling them which of these possibilities you have chosen. Can they identify the voice? Does the exercise complicate or develop your ideas about the passage?

4 CHAPTER

Character

- *As Desire*
- *As Image*
- *As Voice*
- *As Action*
- *As Thought*
- *As Presented by the Author*
- *As Conflict*
- *Stock and Flat Characters*

I write because I want to have more than one life.
Anne Tyler

John Grant

WARM-UP
What does this woman want? Write about what she misses, covets, regrets, dreams of, longs for, deeply desires. What does she want for her daughter? How much of this will she be willing to tell the daughter? What will she admit to no one? Will the daughter share her desires?

NADIA SITS ACROSS FROM ME AT DINNER. SHE IS PETITE, dark-haired. She gestures delicately with her fork. She makes a political point to the famous, bald man beside me, who is sweating and drinking his fourth glass of wine. Nadia's voice is light, her phrases follow each other steadily. The famous man takes another piece of pie. He wipes his forehead with a knuckle, wipes the knuckle on his napkin, flaps the napkin toward Nadia as he replies to her question with a little explosion of sound. I miss some of what he says because his mouth is full of pie. I think: *She's smarter than he is, but he doesn't realize it because he's so impressed with his own fame; actually, underneath, he is terrified of being found out, and he's going to eat and drink himself to death trying to fill the void of his own ego.*

I hardly know these people! How did I come to such conclusions?!

Everything we know about other people we know through our five senses. The outer expresses the inner. Words, actions, and things, which can be seen and heard, express and reveal character and feeling that can be neither seen nor heard. Literature, of course, allows us a freedom that life does not, to be both inside and outside a character, to know thoughts as we can only know them in ourselves, while at the same time seeing the externals as we can for everyone *except* ourselves. In addition, literature can offer an authoritative voice to help us interpret and draw conclusions about the characters.

In nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama, there are essentially five possible methods of presenting a character to the reader:

Directly, through

1. image (or "appearance")
2. voice (or "speech")
3. action
4. thought

Or **indirectly**, through

5. "telling" or interpreting as an author

Each of these methods is discussed in this chapter. But I want to start with a necessity of all character—the phenomenon of desire—because in order to engage the attention and emotions of your reader, you will need (even before you begin to write) to invent, intuit, or decide what each of your characters *wants.*

Character as Desire

> We yearn. We are the yearning creatures of this planet....Yearning is always part of fictional character.
>
> *Robert Olen Butler*

The importance of desire in creating character can scarcely be overstated. Novelist Butler calls it *yearning*, to indicate its poignant and

obsessive nature. Nor is such desire a small thing. Aristotle declared that the nature of a man's desire determines the nature of his morality: He who wants good is good; he who wants evil is evil. (And it follows pretty well that he who wants the trivial is trivial, she who wants peace is peaceful, and so forth.)

Those of us who write are often excellent observers, and we can fall into the trap of creating fictional people who passively observe. Such passive characters lie flat on the page. The characters who stand up and make us care are so in love that they are willing to risk their reputations and their souls (Anna Karenina, for example); or so committed to a cause that they will devote their lives to it (Robin Hood, among many); or driven by a passion to know (like Faust) or to revenge (as in *Hamlet*), or to solve the mystery, climb the mountain, uncover the past, find out who they really are. Of course, the desire need not be as grand as these examples, and in modern literature the questing, conflicted nature of the desire is often and profoundly the point. But it is nevertheless so, that this quality of yearning or determination is what makes us catch our breath, hope for the best, fear the worst, and in short identify with what is, after all, a series of little squiggly lines on a page. "We know rationally," says William Logan, "that Prospero and Miranda never existed, much less Ariel or Caliban; that the real Caesar was not Shakespeare's Caesar; but we can be moved to tears by Ophelia's death, or Cordelia's. The bundles of words behave as if they had private psychologies."

You will have the makings of a character when you can fill out this sentence:

(name) is a (adj.) -year-old (noun) who wants _____.

It isn't so important to trace the motive back to some childhood experience or trauma as it is to explore the nature and reality of the character's desire. What is her deepest need, longing, hope, apart from food and air? What can't he live without?

In thinking about your character's desire, it's a good idea to think both generally and specifically, or about the deep desire and the immediate desire. In filling in the preceding sentence, you might think: *Jeremy Glazer is a belligerent 17-year-old basketball player who wants respect.* "Respect" in this case, an abstraction, represents what Jeremy deeply desires. As a writer you need to ask what, in the particular situation he finds himself in, would represent respect for Jeremy. Being placed on the starting team? Being included in the locker room banter? Or is it his father's acknowledgment that basketball matters as much as his grades? What a character wants deeply (and which

can be expressed in an abstraction) will always have a particular manifestation in a particular situation and can be expressed in a way that leads to image and action.

TRY THIS 4.1

Choose a character you have thought and written about before. Fill out the sentence with blanks shown earlier. Then quickly jot down what makes your character:

- giggle
- wince
- shout
- gag
- go quiet

Imagine your character in a situation that produces one of these emotions. What does he or she *want* in that situation? What is the deep, abstract desire? What, in this specific situation, does he or she want that would fulfill, at least temporarily, that desire?

Character as Image

> The first thing is to see the people every minute.... You have got to learn to paint with words.
>
> *Flannery O'Connor*

Sometimes a beginning writer skips the externals in order to try to take us directly to the abstract essence of a character. But if you let your reader get to know your characters through the sense details, as in life, these images will convey the essence in the way discussed in Chapter 1. How does this character laugh, what is he wearing, how does she move, what gesture does he make, what objects does he carry, what does she eat and drink, what is the tone of her voice, his laugh, the texture of his skin, the smell of her hair?

> Swollen feet
> tripping on vines in the heat,
> palms thick and green-knuckled,
> sweat drying on top of old sweat.
> She flicks her tongue over upper lip
> where the salt stings her cracked mouth.
>
> *"sus plumas el viento," Gloria Anzaldúa*

5

The first half dozen lines of this sharply realized miniature portrait convey much more than the images themselves. We already know the basic elements

of this woman's life, her gender and status, her suffering. We know how poverty feels and tastes, the toll on the body of long overwork.

Especially in fiction and memoir, when a character is first introduced, it's important to let us experience that person through the senses (including sight), and it's often effective to emphasize a particular physical characteristic that can later remind us of the character as a whole. Here is an example from Ayelet Waldman's *Daughter's Keeper:*

> *As a little girl she had been beautiful, rosy-cheeked and blond-ringleted. Today she wore baggy jeans and a ragged green sweatshirt that had been washed so often that its zipper arced in waves from her neck to her waist. Her best feature remained her hair, which hung, an unwashed mass of blond, brown, and red kinky curls, down to the middle of her back. She'd swept part of it off her face and clipped it back with a chipped tortoise-shell barrette.*

Here a series of visible clues (*baggy, ragged, unwashed, chipped*) give us a sense of the young woman's attitudes and lifestyle, while the vivid picture of her hair ensures that the next time this character appears on the scene, the author need only mention the hair to evoke the character. But sometimes the images that evoke character are not direct images of that character at all, but of something in the surroundings.

> *I often wonder who will be the last person to see me alive. If I had to bet, I'd bet on the delivery boy from the Chinese take-out. I order four nights out of seven. Whenever he comes I make a big production of finding my wallet. He stands in the doorway holding the greasy bag while I wonder if this is the night I'll finish off my spring roll, climb into bed, and have a heart attack in my sleep.*
>
> The History of Love, *Nicole Krauss*

Notice how, in this brief passage, the loneliness and longing of the old man are conveyed in the apparently mundane images of the Chinese takeout delivery, as well as in the clipped, almost throw-away rhythm of his voice.

Traditionally, the characters in a play may be minimally described (*Lisa, in her teens, scruffy; Ludovico, blind, a former spy*), for the very good reason that the people in the audience will have the live actor in front of them to offer a sense impression, heightened by costume, makeup, and lighting. But playwrights can and often do vividly signal in their stage directions the physical attributes, gestures, and clothes of their characters, and actors can and often do gratefully make use of this information to explore the character's inner life.

> *Leaning on the solitary table, his head cupped in one hand as he pages through one of his comic books, is Sam. A black man in his mid-forties. He wears the white coat of a waiter.*
>
> "Master Harold"...and the Boys, *Athol Fugard*

Or:

> *...Lou, the magician, enters. He is dressed in the traditional costume of Mr. Interlocutor: tuxedo, bow tie, top hat festooned with all kinds of what-nots that are obviously meant for good luck, he does a few catchy "soft shoe" steps & begins singing a traditional version of a black play song.*
>
> spell #7, *Ntozake Shange*

TRY THIS 4.2
If people are characterized by the objects they choose, own, wear, and carry with them, they are also revealed in what they throw away. *Garbology* is the study of society or culture by examining and analyzing its refuse. Write a character sketch by describing the contents of your character's waste basket.

Character as Voice

As a writer you need to hear a character's voice in your head in order to bring him or her to life successfully. This involves moving beyond inventing or remembering the character to inhabiting his or her persona, a challenging task if your character is significantly different from the person you are. As a first step, it's always good practice to write a monologue in your character's voice. Thinking *from the point of view of that character* will help you find the **diction** and the rhythm of his or her speech and thought. Keep going even if you feel you haven't "caught" the character, because sometimes the very fact of continuing will allow you to slip or sidle into the voice you seek.

TRY THIS 4.3
Write a quick sketch of a character you have already worked with—no more than two or three focused details. Then pick one of the trigger lines below and write a monologue in that character's voice. Keep going a little bit past the place where you want to stop.

- After the movie, we...
- I didn't really mean it, but...
- I thought I could smell...
- I know I really ought to...
- If there's anything I can't stand...
- You call that music?

Now look over the monologue and highlight a few phrases that seem to you to catch that character's voice. Pick one of these and use it to begin another short monologue.

One of the ways we understand people is by assessing, partly instinctively and partly through experience, what they express voluntarily and involuntarily. When someone chooses baggy jeans as opposed to slim-fits, or a shaved head, a tuxedo, body piercing, a string of pearls—these are choices, largely conscious, that signal *I am a member of this group.* Other "body language" will strike the viewer as involuntary (dishevelment, poor taste, blushing, slurring, staring, sweating, clumsiness), and so as a betrayal of characteristics that have not been chosen. In the same way speech may be consciously chosen both in its style (the rapper's patter, the lawyer's convolutions) and content (she tells him she's angry, but not that she's broke). On the whole, it is human nature to give the involuntary more credibility than the chosen. We say that *what he said was very generous, but he kept checking to see how it was going over.* His glances *belied* his words. In this case, we say that the words represent the *text,* and that what we read by other means is the *subtext.*

Speech belongs largely in the voluntary category, though like appearance it can (and does) betray us. Talking is an intentional attempt to express the inner as the outer. But when people talk in literature they convey much more than the information in their **dialogue**. They are also working for the author—to reveal themselves, advance the plot, fill in the past, control the pace, establish the tone, foreshadow the future, establish the mood. What busy talk!

NELL: So just fill me in a bit more could you about what you've been doing.

SHONA: What I've been doing. It's all down there.

NELL: The bare facts are down here but I've got to present you to an employer.

SHONA: I'm twenty-nine years old.

NELL: So it says here.

SHONA: We look young. Youngness runs in our family.

NELL: So just describe your present job for me.

SHONA: My present job at present. I have a car. I have a Porsche. I go up the M1 a lot. Burn up the M1 a lot. Straight up the M1 in the fast lane to where the clients are, Staffordshire, Yorkshire, I do a lot in Yorkshire. I'm selling electric things. Like dishwashers, washing machines, stainless steel tubs are a feature and the reliability of the program....

Top Girls, *Caryl Churchill*

Notice how the characters produce tension by contradicting each other (*Fill me in; it's all down there; but I've got to present you; I'm twenty-nine; so it says*). This is known as "no dialogue," in which characters are in many and various ways saying "no" to each other. They may be angry or polite, disagreeing, contradicting, qualifying, or frankly quarreling. But whatever the tone, they spark our interest because we want to find out what will happen in this overt or implied conflict.

Notice also how Shona's description of her job reveals the subtext. She falters between concrete imagery and flimsy generalization, contradicting in generalization what she tries to prove by making up convincing details. She is

spinning lies without sufficient information or imagination, so it's no great surprise when Nell ends the exchange with, "Christ, what a waste of time... Not a word of this is true, is it?"

Dramatic dialogue is always **direct**, as in this example, all the words spoken. In fiction, nonfiction, or poems, direct dialogue of this sort is lively and vivid, but sometimes the narrative needs to cover ground faster, and then dialogue may be **indirect** or **summarized**. Summarized dialogue, efficient but textureless, gives us a brief report:

> *Shona claimed she had sales experience, but Nell questioned both her age and her expertise.*

Indirect dialogue gives the flavor of the dialogue without quoting directly:

> *Nell wanted her to fill in the facts, so Shona repeated that she was twenty-nine, claimed that looking young ran in the family, and that she drove a Porsche up to Staffordshire to sell dishwashers and washing machines. But she couldn't seem to come up with the word "appliances."*

There's a strong temptation to make dialogue eloquent (you are a writer, after all), and the result is usually that it becomes stilted. People are often *not* eloquent precisely about what moves them most. Half the time we aren't really sure what we mean, and if we are, we don't want to say it, and if we do, we can't find the words, and if we can, others aren't listening, and if they are, they don't understand....In fact, the various failures to communicate can make the richest sort of dialogue, just as the most stunted language is sometimes the most revealing of character.

In this example from David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green*, thirteen-year-old Jason Taylor comes home from school. Notice how in this short space Mum's actions contradict her words, her "sarky" (sarcastic) tone conceals her secret, and Jason's thoughts contradict his responses. Notice also that we are never in doubt who's speaking, though there is only one "he said."

> *Mum was at the dining room table... Dad's fireproof document box was out and open. Through the kitchen hatch I asked if she'd had a good day. "Not a good day, exactly." Mum didn't take her eyes off her calculator. "But it's certainly been a real revelation."*
>
> *"That's good," I said, doubting it. I got a couple of Digestives and a glass of Ribena. Julia's snaffled all the Jaffa Cakes 'cause she's at home all day revising for her A levels. Greedy moo. "What're you doing?"*
>
> *"Skateboarding."*
>
> *I should've just gone upstairs. "What's for dinner?"*
>
> *"Toad."*
>
> *One unsarky answer to one simple question, that's all I wanted. "Doesn't Dad usually do all the bank statements and stuff?"*
>
> *"Yes." Mum finally looked at me. "Isn't your lucky old father in for a pleasant surprise when he gets home..."*

Debate and argument can make interesting dialogue if the matter itself is interesting, but in imaginative writing debate and argument are usually too static to be of interest, too simple and too single. Eudora Welty explained in an interview with the *Paris Review*, "Sometimes I needed to make a speech do four or five things at once—reveal what the character said but also what he thought he said, what he hid, what others were going to think he meant, and what they misunderstood—and so forth—all in this single speech.... I used to laugh out loud sometimes when I wrote it."

If a character expresses in dialogue what he/she means, that character has done only one thing, whereas as a writer you are constantly trying to mean more than you say, to give several clues at once to the inner lives of your characters. If Jeannine says:

> *I feel that civilization is encroaching on nature, and that the greed of the developers will diminish the value of all our lives—*

—she has expressed an opinion, but little of her inner life is revealed: her emotions, her history, her particularities. This is the dialogue equivalent of the vague category images described in Chapter 2. But if she says:

> *They should lock up that builder. He's massacred the neighborhood. I remember how the lilac and wisteria used to bloom, and then the peonies and the daffodils. What fragrance in this room! But now. Smell the stink of that site next door. It just makes me sick.*

—the same opinion is expressed, but her emotions—anger, nostalgia, and defeat—also are vividly revealed, and through particular detail.

TRY THIS 4.4
Write a "dialogue" between two characters, only one of whom can speak. The other is physically, emotionally, or otherwise prevented from saying what he/she wants to say. Write only the words of the one, only the appearance and actions of the other.

Character as Action

> By our actions we discover what we really believe and, simultaneously, reveal ourselves to others.
>
> *John Gardner*

I have said that a character is first of all someone who *wants*. Whatever the nature of that desire, it will lead the character toward action and therefore toward potential change. The action may be as large as a military charge or as small as removing a coffee cup, but it will signal or symbolize for the reader that a significant change has occurred. The characters who interest and move us are those who are capable of such change.

Playwright Sam Smiley observes that "Any significant discovery forces change in conditions, relationships, activity or all three." And, he says, "The quickest and best way to know someone is to see that person make a significant decision.... At the instant a character makes a choice, he changes from one state to another; his significant relationships alter; and usually he must follow a new line of action as a consequence."

If we grant that *discovery* and *decision* are the two agents of human change, characters will be *in action* when these are possible. Action as in *action-packed* is a crude but effective way of getting discovery and decision into a work:

> *There's the bad guy! (discovery) Quick, I will load my revolver, hide behind this pillar, turn and shoot. (decision) But wait! There's his accomplice on the catwalk above me! (discovery) I will roll under this forklift to avoid his bullet! (decision)*

The thriller, the cop show, the alien, and the spy are enormously popular (and money-making) genres because they simplify and exaggerate our experience of what action is. But of course most human discovery, decision, and change take place in the realm of work, love, relationship, and family, and it's important for the literary writer to recognize discovery and decision in these areas, where they are likely to be both complex and difficult.

One reason that debate and argument seem static is that characters holding forth with well thought-out positions seem unlikely to change, whereas dialogue that represents potential change *becomes* itself dramatic action. In dramatic dialogue, in ways large and small, characters are constantly making discoveries and decisions. Look again at the previous exchange between Nell and Shona. What does Nell discover about Shona? What does Shona decide to say to prove herself? Look at the exchange between Jason and his mum. What does Jason want? Discover? Decide? What discovery and decision of Mum's can you infer from the subtext?

Change may seem most obvious in literature with a strong story line, and of course discovery and decision will often involve a physical action: she opens the letter, he picks up the phone, she slams the door, he steps on the gas. But change also, importantly, occurs in the mind. And even in the gentlest piece of memoir or the slightest nature lyric the persona is made aware of something that seems important, something that has not before been present to the mind and now is, and so changes the entire mental landscape. Frequently (by no means always; still, frequently) in the tradition of memoir this mental change has to do with a new perspective on the complexity of life and human beings; frequently in lyric poetry it has to do with the ephemeral quality of beauty, and therefore an awareness of death.

The change from *alive to dead* is a major one, as is the change from *in danger to triumphant hero.* But discovery and decision are no less present in the subtle and profound exchanges of ordinary life.

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with snow along the bough
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Easter tide.

Now of my threescore years and ten
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score,
That only leaves me fifty more.

And since, to look at things in bloom,
Fifty years is little room,
About the woodland I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

"II" from A Shropshire Lad, *A. E. Housman*

In this very low-key poem (you can hear the stillness, the deliberate pace, in the rhythm), the poet makes two discoveries and a decision. The first discovery is of the snow on the trees; the second is of the brevity of life. The decision is simply to walk in the woods, but in following this "new line of action" he also "changes from one state to another," in that he acknowledges his mortality.

TRY THIS 4.5
Take a monologue you have already written and add actions, in the form of either narration or stage directions. Make the action contradict or qualify the speech. E.g., "I'm not worried about it at all. These things don't throw me." (*She twists her hands.*) and so forth. Remember that a good way to reveal characters' feelings is through their relationships to objects.

Character as Thought

Although discovery and decision necessarily *imply* thought, image, speech, and action are all external manifestations—things that we could observe. Imaginative writing has the power also to take us inside the minds of characters to show us what they are thinking. Again, different degrees of the revelation of thought are appropriate to different forms of literature:

- In a memoir or personal essay we count on the honest thoughts of the author but can't credibly see into the minds of other characters. (Even this quasi-rule is sometimes broken; Tom Wolfe, in his techniques of "new journalism," frequently turns what his interviewees say into a kind

of mental patter or stream of consciousness, as if these quotations were in fact their thoughts.)

- A character in a drama is necessarily speaking and therefore making his/her thoughts external, but there are a number of theatrical traditions to let us know that we are overhearing thoughts—as in soliloquy, aside, voice-over. Many characters in modern drama speak directly to the audience, and usually do so with an assumed honesty apropos of what is going on in their minds, whereas in dialogue with other characters they may lie, conceal, stumble, or become confused.
- Fiction usually (except in the case of the objective narrator) gives us the thoughts of at least the central character.
- A persona in poetry is usually sharing thoughts. Poetry also has the same freedom as fiction, to be presented from the point of view of a character—and this character may reveal what's on his or her mind.

Aristotle suggested a useful way of looking at thought in relation to desire. A persona or character begins with a certain desire, and therefore a certain specific goal in mind. Thought is the process by which she works backward to decide what to do in the immediate situation that presents itself. "Loveliest of Trees" is a condensed poetic demonstration of this process. My apologies to Housman for this rude paraphrase—*The chances are I will die at about seventy. I'm twenty now. That means I have fifty years left. That's not many years to look at these trees. I will look at them now.* But it does show not only Aristotle's understanding of the thought process, but also how crucial to the beauty of the poem is Housman's diction.

Thought, like dialogue, is also action when it presents us with the process of change. Since both discovery and decision take place in the mind, thought is material to every character and is in fact the locus of action and the dwelling place of desire. In the first lines of any poem, the first page of every story, the curtain rise of every drama, you can find a human consciousness yearning for whatever might occur in the last line, on the last page, in the last scene. The action proceeds because that consciousness makes a lightning-fast leap backward to the present moment, to decide what action can be taken now, at this moment, in this situation, to achieve that goal. At every new discovery, the mind repeats the process, ever changing in the service of a fixed desire.

TRY THIS 4.6

Pick a character. What is your character's deep desire? What is the situation that the character is in now—where, doing what, in the company of whom? Make a list, inventing as you go, of the character's thought process, backward from the ultimate desire to the specific action (or inaction) that would lead eventually toward that desire.

Character as Presented by the Author

Appearance, speech, action, and thought are the direct methods of presenting character. The *indirect method* is **authorial interpretation**—"telling" us the character's background, motives, values, virtues, and the like. The advantages of the indirect method are enormous, for its use leaves you free to move in time and space; to know anything you choose to know whether the character knows it or not; and godlike, to tell us what we are to feel. The indirect method allows you to convey a great deal of information in a short time.

> *The port town of Veracruz is a little purgatory between land and sea for the traveler, but the people who live there are very fond of themselves and the town they have helped to make... and they carry on their lives of alternate violence and lethargy with a pleasurable contempt for outside opinion....*
>
> Ship of Fools, *Katherine Anne Porter*

The disadvantage of this indirect method is that it bars us readers from sharing the immediacy and vividness of detail and the pleasure of judging for ourselves. In the summarized judgments of this passage, for example, we learn more about the attitude of the narrator than about the town. Nevertheless, the indirect method is very efficient when you want to cover the exposition quickly, as A. S. Byatt does in this passage from "Crocodile Tears."

> *The Nimmos spent their Sundays in those art galleries that had the common sense to open on that dead day.... They liked buying things, they liked simply looking, they were happily married and harmonious in their stares, on the whole. They engaged a patch of paint and abandoned it, usually simultaneously, they lingered in the same places, considering the same things. Some they remembered, some they forgot, some they carried away.*

Thus in a few sentences of the first paragraph, Byatt tells us everything we need to know about the Nimmos' marriage—especially since Mr. Nimmo is going to die on the next page, and the story will then concern itself with Mrs. Nimmo's flight from the scene. Notice that although this passage is full of analysis and interpretation, we are given some images to look at: "...harmonious in their stares...They engaged a patch of paint and abandoned it..." In an instance such as this, authorial interpretation functions for pace and structure. But it is not a very useful mode to describe human change, which involves action and therefore calls for the immediacy of scene, and of the direct presentation of character.

TRY THIS 4.7
Write a paragraph of no more than a hundred words presenting a character through authorial interpretation. Cover at least five years in the character's life, four qualities he or she possesses, three important events, and two habitual actions.

Character as Conflict

> The meaning of life must be conceived in terms of the specific meaning of a personal life in a given situation.
>
> *Victor Frankl*

Rich characterization can be effectively (and quite consciously) achieved by producing a conflict between methods of presentation. A character can be directly revealed to us through *image, voice, action,* and *thought.* If you set one of these methods at odds with the others, then dramatic tension will be produced. Imagine, for example, a character who is impeccable and expensively dressed, who speaks eloquently, who acts decisively, and whose mind is revealed to us as full of order and determination. He is inevitably a flat character. But suppose that he is impeccable, eloquent, and decisive, and that his mind is a mess of wounds and panic. He is at once interesting.

Here is the opening passage of Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day,* in which appearance and action are blatantly at odds with thought. Notice that it is the tension between suppressed thought and what is expressed through appearance and action that produces the rich character conflict.

> *When it came to concealing his troubles, Tommy Wilhelm was not less capable than the next fellow. So at least he thought, and there was a certain amount of evidence to back him up. He had once been an actor—no, not quite, an extra—and he knew what acting should be. Also, he was smoking a cigar, and when a man is smoking a cigar, wearing a hat, he has an advantage: it is harder to find out how he feels. He came from the twenty-third floor down to the lobby on the mezzanine to collect his mail before breakfast, and he believed—he hoped—he looked passably well: doing all right.*

Thought is most frequently at odds with one or more of the other three methods of direct presentation—reflecting the difficulty we have expressing ourselves openly or accurately—but this is by no means always the case. The author may be directly telling us what to think and contradicting herself by showing the character to be someone else entirely. A character may be successfully, calmly, even eloquently, expressing fine opinions while betraying himself by pulling at his ear, or herself by crushing her skirt. Captain Queeg of Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny* is a memorable example of this, maniacally clicking the steel balls in his hand as he defends his disciplinary code. Often we are not privy to the thoughts of a character at all, so that the conflicts must be expressed in a contradiction between the external methods of direct presentation, appearance, speech, and action. Notice that the notion of "betraying oneself" is again important here. We're more likely to believe the evidence unintentionally given than deliberate expression.

TRY THIS 4.8
Write a short character sketch (it may be from life) focusing on how your character makes a living. Put your character in a working situation, and let us know by a combination of direct and indirect methods what that work is; how well he/she does it; what it looks, sounds, smells like; and how the character feels about it. Contrast the methods.

TRY THIS 4.9
Write a stage direction for two people that conveys the emotional relationship between them. They may gesture, move, touch, and relate to objects or elements of the place; but there is no dialogue.

Stock and Flat Characters

I have insisted on the creation of character through an understanding of desire and through many methods of presentation. But it would be impractical and unnecessary to go through this process for every passerby on the fictional street, and boring to present such characters fully.

Flat characters are those defined by a single idea or quality. They may exist only to fulfill a function, and we need know little about them. It's true that they can be brought to brief life in an image—notice that the takeout delivery boy in the passage from Nicole Krauss's *History of Love*, "stands in the doorway holding the greasy bag"—but neither the author nor the reader needs to stop to explore their psychology, or to give them the complexity that would make them *round*.

Stock characters or *caricatures* are related to flat characters in that they insistently present a single idea or quality. If you have aimed for a lifelike and complex character, and someone says you've created a stock character, that's not good. But some writers, especially in drama, effectively use stock characters as a way of satirizing human types. Eugene Ionesco takes the technique to its extreme in *The Bald Soprano*:

> MRS. SMITH: There, it's nine o'clock. We've drunk the soup, and eaten the fish and chips, and the English salad. The children have drunk English water. We've eaten well this evening. That's because we live in the suburbs of London and because our name is Smith.

TRY THIS 4.10
Go back to something you have written and find a character who appears only briefly or is named or referred to without appearing. Characterize that person with a single vivid image.

Or:

Pick two stock characters from the list below. Decide what one wants from the other. Caricature them by writing a dialogue between them.

Absent-minded professor
Drug pusher
Naïve girl
Rock or hip-hop wannabe
Rich widow
Evangelist

More to Read

Chiarella, Tom. *Writing Dialogue.* Cincinnati: Story Press, 1998. Print.
Minot, Stephen. *Three Genres.* Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002. Print.

READINGS

CREATIVE NONFICTION

ALEKSANDAR HEMON

The Book of My Life

Professor Nikola Koljević had the long, slender fingers of a piano player. Although he was now a literature professor—he was my teacher at the University of Sarajevo in the late eighties—as a student he'd supported himself by playing the piano in the jazz bars of Belgrade. He'd even had gigs as a member of a circus orchestra—he'd sit at the fringe of the arena, I imagined, with a Shakespeare tragedy open above the piano keys, flexing his fingers, ignoring the lions, waiting for the clowns to enter.

Professor Koljević taught a course in poetry and criticism, for which we read poetry with a critical slant—the New Critic Cleanth Brooks was his patron saint. In his class we learned how to analyze the inherent properties of a piece of literature, disregarding politics, biography, or anything external to the text. Most of the other teachers delivered their lectures passionlessly, even haughtily; possessed by the demons of scholastic boredom, they asked for nothing in particular from us. In Professor Koljević's class, on the other hand, we unpacked poems like Christmas presents and the solidarity of common discoveries filled the small, hot room on the top floor of the Faculty of Philosophy.

He was incredibly well read. He often quoted Shakespeare in English off the top of his head, which always impressed me; I, too, wanted to have

read everything and to be able to quote with case. He also taught an essay-writing course—the only writing course I've ever taken—where we read the classic essayists, beginning with Montaigne, and then tried to produce some lofty-seeming thoughts, coming up with hapless imitations instead. Still, it was flattering that he found it even remotely possible we could write something belonging to the same universe as Montaigne. It made us feel as if we had been personally invited to participate in the fine, gentle business of literature.

Once, Professor Koljević told us about the book his daughter had begun writing at the age of five. She had titled it "The Book of My Life," but had written only the first chapter. She planned to wait for more life to accumulate, he told us, before starting Chapter 2. We laughed, still in our early chapters, oblivious to the malignant plots accelerating all around us.

5 After I'd graduated, I phoned to thank Professor Koljević for what he'd taught me, for introducing me to the world that could be conquered by reading. Back then, calling him was a brave act for a srudent ever in awe of his professors, but he was not put out. He invited me for an evening stroll by the Miljacka River, and we discussed literature and life as friends and equals. He put his hand on my shoulder as we walked, his fingers cramped like hooks as he held on, for I was considerably taller than he. It was uncomfortable, but I said nothing. He had, flatteringly, crossed a border, and I did not want to undo the closeness.

Not long after our stroll, I began working as an editor for *Naši dani*. At around the same time, Professor Koljević became one of the highest-positioned members of the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), a virulently nationalist organization, headed by Karadžić, the talentless poet destined to become the world's most-wanted war criminal. I attended SDS press conferences and listened to Karadžić's roaring paranoia and racism, his imposing head looming on our horizon: large, cuboid, topped with an unruly gray mane. And Professor Koljević would be there too, sitting next to Karadžić: small, solemn, and academic, with large jar-bottom glasses, wearing a tweed jacket with suede elbow patches, his long fingers crossed loosely in front of his face, as if suspended between a prayer and applause. Afterward, I'd come up to greet him, dutifully, assuming that we still shared a love of books. "Stay out of this," he'd advise me. "Stick to literature."

In 1992, when the Serbian attack on Bosnia and the siege of Sarajevo began, I found myself in the United States. Safe in Chicago, I watched Serbian snipers shoot at the knees and ankles of a man trying to escape from a truck that had been hit by a rocket. On the front pages of magazines and newspapers, I saw emaciated prisoners in Serbian camps, and the terrified faces of people running down Sniper Alley. I watched as the Sarajevo library perished in patient, deliberate flames.

The infernal irony of a poet (bad though he may have been) and a literature professor causing the destruction of hundreds of thousands of books did not escape me. On the news, I sometimes caught a glimpse of Professor Koljević standing beside Karadžić, who was always denying something—what was happening was for him either "self-defense" or it was not happening at all. Occasionally, Professor Koljević talked to reporters himself, mocking the questions about rape camps, or deflecting all accusations of Serbian crimes by framing them as the unfortunate things that take place in every "civil war." In Marcel Ophüls's *The Troubles We've Seen*, a documentary about foreign reporters covering the war in Bosnia, Professor Koljević—labeled as "Serbian Shakespearean"—speaks to a BBC reporter, dispensing spin phrases in impeccable English and explaining away the sounds of Serbian shells falling on Sarajevo in the background as a part of the ritual celebration of Orthodox Christmas. "Obviously," he said, "from the old times, Serbs like to do this." He smiled as he said that, apparently relishing his own cleverness. "But it is not even Christmas," the BBC reporter observed.

I became obsessed with Professor Koljević. I kept trying to identify the first moment when I could have noticed his genocidal proclivities. Racked with guilt, I recalled his lectures and the conversations we'd had, as if picking through ashes—the ashes of my library. I *unread* books and poems I used to like—from Emily Dickinson to Danilo Kiš, from Frost to Tolstoy—*unlearning* the way in which he had taught me to read them, because I should've known, I should've paid attention. I'd been mired in close reading, impressionable and unaware that my favorite teacher was involved in plotting a vast crime. But what's done cannot be undone.

Now it seems clear to me that his evil had far more influence on me than his literary vision. I excised and exterminated that precious, youthful part of me that had believed you could retreat from history and hide from evil in the comforts of art. Because of Professor Koljević, perhaps, my writing is infused with testy impatience for bourgeois babbling, regrettably tainted with helpless rage I cannot be rid of.

Toward the end of the war, Professor Koljević fell out of favor with Karadžić and was demoted from the realms of power. He spent his time drinking heavily, now and then giving an interview to a foreign journalist, ranting about various injustices committed against the Serbian people in general and himself in particular. In 1997, he blew his Shakespeare-laden brains out. He had to shoot twice, his long piano-player finger apparently having trembled on the unwieldy trigger.

TRY THIS 4.11

Quickly write two pages about a teacher, real or imagined, who has a profound effect on you or on an invented character.

BENJAMIN PERCY

Me vs. Animals

I.

I was working for the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry. This was after my junior year of high school and I spent two months in the woods, wandering up and down dry canyons, scouting rock-art sites, mapping them. I lived out of my backpack. I fell asleep every night under stars dampened by campfire and obscured by the shapes of bats. I ate beans and rice and raisins and granola. I bathed in rivers and scrubbed my body with sand. Early one morning I was sitting on a boulder. The wall of basalt behind me was notched with petroglyphs and splashed with pictographs that displayed suns, snakes, men with big penises, what could have been a pig or could have been a bear. One of my buddies was rubbing charcoal over a strip of butcher paper he had pressed to the wall; a face with swirling eyes came alive on it.

Our expedition leader was talking to the rancher who owned this land. I was listening to them and trying to wake up, gnawing on the granola bar that was my breakfast. The rancher—a man with a throat clawed out by cigarettes and a face as brown and creased as an old baseball mitt—nodded at me and said, "Don't move, boy." At my feet, curled up in a pile like a thick hose, was a Western rattler. It had come from its burrow to soak up the sun. It was not rattling, not yet, but its spade-shaped head was raised and a tongue darted from it. We had roped off, with string and stakes, a section of the site to dig; the rancher now yanked one of the stakes from the ground and held it above his head. The rattler seemed to know his intentions; its tail started to shake and its head pulled back like a fist. The rancher brought down the stake and the snake struck it, hissing, while I rolled off the rock and grabbed a shovel and brought it down on the snake's head and cut it clean off.

Its body, now uncoiled, measured five feet long. Though dead, it continued to move, turning over and over, forming strange designs in the sand for the next three hours. It was like watching a campfire, watching the decapitated snake, something deadly and beautiful—but tamed, under control.

I buried the head because my father had told me that if the bees and yellow jackets eat their way through the venom sacs they take on the poison as their own. That evening I gutted and skinned the body and chopped up the meat and cooked it in a pan over the fire and it tasted awful, like rubber bands, but I ate it anyway, every bit of it. The rattle I pocketed and later put in a drawer with my baseball cards.

II.

5 The chicken coop was made of rotten gray boards and littered with shit and feathers. Every morning, growing up, I would go to the coop with my mother

to toss seed and collect eggs. I had left the seed sack out overnight and when we approached the shed it trembled and bulged like some sort of nightmarish caul. My mother slowly went to it and gave it a kick, testing it. There came from inside the bag a faint screeching and then the bag overturned and from its mouth spilled more than two dozen mice, a gray wave of them. My mother screamed and I stomped at them and kicked at them as they scurried underfoot. The coop exploded with a furious clucking and from its black doorway came all our chickens. I hardly recognized them—the same fat-bottomed hens I petted and whispered to when collecting eggs—as they fell upon the mice with a terrible hunger. They fipped back their heads and pecked red holes in their gray bodies, pecked until the mice opened up and came apart into digestible pieces. Tails dangled from their beaks like tongues. All this in less than a minute. And then they clucked contentedly and strutted about the yard, scratching at the dirt with their claws as if blood might well up there too.

III.

If you take the Highline Trail in Glacier National Park, turn east at Swift Current Pass, and walk about another seven miles, you'll reach Many Glacier Hotel, where I worked as a gardener. The hike takes all day and drops over three thousand feet from rocky cliffsides through fields of orange hawkweed and desert paintbrush and glacier lilies, through forests choked with pines and birch and manzanita, through a zigzagging series of switchbacks that finally bottom out in Many Glacier Valley. I was nearly to the bottom of the valley, on a steep hillside, when I came around a corner and spotted an enormous brown ass.

A bear, I thought—I'm dead. The rangers called the REI bells people wore on their backpacks "dinner bells," and pepper spray was "seasoning"; they said, Always hike with someone you can outrun. Earlier that summer, one of my coworkers had been eaten by a grizzly. His boots were found with his feet still in them. And only a week ago, my roommate had been pursued—stalked—for ten miles by a mother and her cubs.

The animal rose up from where it had been grazing and stepped from behind a thicket of scrub birch and revealed itself to be a moose with a wide rack of antlers and a droopy nose. I felt relieved, but it was short lived. Moose might look ridiculous, but they can be the most dangerous things in the forest. When confronted they will stomp you with their hooves and scoop you into the basket of their antlers.

We were ten yards apart. The stream-fed bottom of Many Glacier Valley was a hundred yards below. The hotel was three miles away. The sun was setting. My stomach was caved in with hunger. My knees were wobbly from exhaustion. I didn't have a flashlight. I couldn't wait and I couldn't hike back the way I had come. When I haven't eaten—and since breakfast that morning

I hadn't eaten anything but trail mix—my thoughts get muddy, my temper sharpens, and I lash out at the world. I go a little crazy.

10 This was one of those moments. I pawed loose a fist-sized stone from the hillside and, without bothering to take aim, or to second-guess myself, I hurled it at the moose. I hit it squarely along the ribs, its fur and fat and muscle rippling outward. The moose released a throaty moan that sounded like dinosaurs sound in the movies, before it went crashing down the hill, its long legs scissoring.

Down was a good place for it to go, away from me, toward the hotel. But at the bottom of the valley, it splashed into the stream, milky white with glacial till, and stopped there to drink. Water fell from its snout. Ferns huddled along the bank and the moose began to nibble on them. I descended the hill as slowly and quietly as I could, cursing the moose and willing it to leave, to let me by.

The shadows deepened. I waited ten minutes and then found another stone. My aim wasn't as good this time, but good enough. The splash and clatter of its impact sent the moose racing from the stream, kicking up rooster tails of mud and water. The trail ran beside the stream and the moose took to it and vanished behind a cluster of willows. I stood there for a good minute—listening to the fading sound of hooves thudding and antlers crashing through the undergrowth—before starting forward.

Around the bend I found a man. His name was Patrick and he worked as a waiter at the hotel. He was lying on the side of the trail with his hand over his heart. When he saw me, he roughed away the tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. He said, "You'll never believe what just happened." He stood up and brushed the dirt off himself. "This moose—this fucking moose, man—this *moose.*" He threw his arms up in the air and let them fall. "It just came hurtling around the corner and swung its antlers at me and I jumped out of the way, jumped right off the trail, and this moose—this goddamn moose—kept going." He was breathing heavily. So was I. "I was almost killed," he said.

"Really?" I said. "Wow."

15 The remainder of the trail we hiked together. I kept my eyes sharp on the forest and despite the deepening gloom felt some measure of safety, knowing I could outrun Patrick if I had to.

IV.

I grew up on ten acres of woods. One afternoon when I was eleven, there rose a terrible screaming from them, as slow as smoke. I went to my window and opened it and stared off into the forest. A minute of silence passed and then the screaming began again. It was the worst sound I had ever heard; I was reminded of the banshee stories my grandfather liked to tell me, so that when the door to the bedroom clattered open, I jumped. It was my father. He was holding a rifle, a 30.06. He told me to follow him, and I did as he told me. We followed one of the many game trails that snaked past logs furred over with

moss, past hemlocks and cedars and firs, and all the while the screaming continued, a woman's wail, until we came to the fence that edged our property. In it hung a deer, a six-point buck, tangled up in the barbed wire. It thrashed at our slow approach and loosed another wretched wail and then went still for a moment with its tongue hanging from its mouth. Its hide was the color of cinnamon where it wasn't oozing with blood. My father laid a hand on my shoulder. It was heavy enough to make my shoulder drop a little. He looked at me seriously and said I should kill the deer, as if killing were driving a stick-shift or installing a light fixture, something I ought to learn how to do.

V.

In Iowa, when autumn comes and the leaves fall from the oaks and maples, the crows take their place, filling out the naked branches like black fruit. They squawk their rusty music. They roost on garbage cans and busy themselves along the gravel shoulders of country roads to peck at the broken-necked deer, the flattened carcasses of raccoons and opossums.

They fly together, hundreds of them, in black clouds. Sometimes I go to the top floor of a local high-rise, where a bar and grill serves cold beer and bloody burgers. The floor-to-ceiling windows warm the bar with sunlight that is regularly interrupted by a seething black curtain of crows that rise up caw-caw-cawing to roost on the roof.

They would also roost on the roof of Carver Hall at Iowa State University. Hundreds and hundreds of them. They would cackle all day and make the sidewalks slick with guano and dive-bomb students. Now there is a sound system installed on the roof. It plays, over and over, the sound of tortured crows. It is an awful sound. And I wonder about the recording of it, the crows electrocuted, waterboarded in a sound studio somewhere.

Once, in December, in the snowbound central campus, a group of children gathered to sing Christmas carols. They wore sweaters with snowflakes and reindeer on them. Their cheeks were red from the cold and their breath was visible in clouds. And as they harked and heralded, as they fah-la-la-la-lahed, the silences between their songs were filled by the sound of tortured crows.

And once, on a blustery day when the sky was full of gray-bellied clouds, when I was out riding my bike, I passed three crows roosting in the low-hanging branch of a sugar maple. They hissed and opened up their wings and took flight. They paced me, not cawing, silent except for the flapping of their wings. Their eyes, regarding me, were as black as their feathers. They were so close I could have reached out and pulled them from the air.

VI.

The deer, a four point, hung all night in the garage, away from the flies, its hind hock knotted to the rafters with a yellow nylon rope. It turned around

and around and the rope creaked and its black eyes reflected a warped version of my face when I squatted beside it, watching it bleed out. My father and I had gutted it in the woods and now its belly was an empty sack a child could crawl into. Below the deer sat a big metal bowl that was full of blood by morning, when my father and I carried the carcass outside and threw the rope over the low-hanging limb of a juniper tree. We tossed the bowl of blood out onto the yard. The head we chopped off and set aside. The flies and yellow jackets soon took to it. We laid out a blue tarp where we would stack the meat, the chops and roasts and steaks. But first we had to skin the carcass. When we slid our knives under the hide, cutting and peeling it away from the muscles, there was a sound like electricity spitting and hissing from a downed wire. Our hands were gloved with blood and my father, determined, painted lines beneath his eyes and on my face made a drippy red mustache.

VII.

I came home to find a broken window and a porch full of broken glass, the hundreds of shards catching the afternoon light and making my eyes narrow. I should have turned around. I should have, if I had any sense in me, clomped off the porch, rung the doorbell of a neighbor, and asked him to call 911. But I did not.

Something was uncoiling inside me, a great anger that took hold of my body. I barely heard the glass as it crunched under my boots, barely felt the doorknob in my hand as I keyed it open. I stood in my darkened living room, which seemed suddenly unfamiliar, sharp-edged with furniture, the television like a watchful gray eye in the corner. And then the house began to shake with footsteps.

This was in Illinois and I lived in a bungalow shaped like a shoe box, with a hallway running through the middle of it. Down this hallway flew a shadow, racing away from me, toward the bedroom. There was the sound of a door slamming and then a shuddering groan as my bed was dragged against it.

The shuddering seemed to travel through the floorboards and up my legs and I began to shake. My fingers twitched. My teeth chattered. My eyelids blinked at shutter speed. I was like some character in a horror film who looks wildly to the moon when the clouds roll away from it, knowing he is about to turn inside out, at once relishing and fearing the prospect. I was acting on impulse. Pure reflex. Tooth and claw. Someone had invaded my territory.

There was a pile of coupons and a pair of scissors on the floor next to the couch. I grabbed the scissors. The anger rolled over inside me like a big black dog and I began to lope down the hall, howling. I crashed against the locked door, and as I did, I heard the sound of my bedroom window being kicked out.

He must have thought he had wandered into some cave—or overturned some rock—and some awful, sharp-fanged creature had scrabbled out. He must have thought that something wild pursued him. And maybe he was right.

By the time I splintered through the door, by the time I knocked aside the bed, the room was empty. I walked to the window, where fangs of blood-stained glass surrounded the hole kicked there, and looked through it.

VIII.

At the bar, over a pitcher of Fat Tire, I said to my buddy Jeremy, "If you were in a twelve-by-twelve-by-twelve-foot steel cage. Barred. If you were in that cage and you were naked, what is the largest animal you could fight and kill?"

Jeremy is a big man with shoulders rounded with muscle and a brow that juts out and throws a shadow over his eyes. "Do I have to be naked?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

He took a sip of his beer and with his forearm wiped the foam off his upper lip. "There must be rules."

"Yes," I said. "There are always rules." I had been mulling them over the past few days. "Your body weight must match the weight of the animal. So if you, for example, pussy out and say, 'a robin,' a robin is what you could kill, well, my friend, that means you'll have—what?—three hundred robins?—maybe more?—in that cage with you. All coming after you. All peck-peck-pecking at your eyes." I made my hands into robins and he flinched away from them.

"What about aquatic creatures? Like a shark?"

"You're thinking you could kill a shark?

"Maybe."

"In the case of an aquatic creature, the cage will be pitched at an angle, with half of it underwater."

"Does the animal know what's going on? Or is it just like, I'm in a twelve-by-twelve-by-twelve-foot steel cage with some dude—what's up with that?"

"The animal knows what's going on. It wants to kill you."

He took another sip of beer. He drummed out a song on the bar with his knuckles. A smile cut his face. "A giraffe."

"A giraffe?"

"Yes. A giraffe. It would be all bent in half and folded up and shit. It couldn't move."

"Good answer."

"What about you?"

Beads of perspiration ran down the side of my pint glass. Behind the bar hung a mirror stenciled with bears clambering through woods and elk perched on mountaintops. I tried to make my eyes go out of focus—to look beyond the mirror and envision a cage, an animal panting and snarling in its far corner—but I could only see myself.

TRY THIS 4.12
Write a paragraph or two of response to this essay in the character of:

- an old women who has 46 cats
- a big-game hunter in Africa
- a member of PETA
- a pig

FICTION

RICHARD BAUSCH

Tandolfo the Great

"Tandolfo," he says to his own image in the mirror over the bathroom sink. "She loves you not, you goddam fool."

He's put the makeup on, packed the bag of tricks—including the rabbit, whom he calls Chi-Chi; and the bird, attention-getter, which he calls Witch. He's to do a birthday party on the other side of the river. Some five-year-old, and so this is going to be one of those tough ones, a crowd of babies, and all the adults waiting around for him to screw up.

He has fortified himself with something, and he feels ready. He isn't particularly worried about it. But there's a little something else he has to do, first. Something on the order of the embarrassingly ridiculous: he has to make a small delivery.

This morning, at the local bakery, he picked up a big pink wedding cake, with its six tiers and its scalloped edges and its little bride and groom on top. He'd ordered it on his own: he'd taken the initiative, planning to offer it to a young woman of his acquaintance. He managed somehow to set the thing on the backseat of the car and when he got home he found a note from her announcing, all excited and happy, that she's engaged. The man she'd had such trouble with has had a change of heart; he wants to get married after all. She's going to Houston to live. She loves her dear old Tandolfo with a big kiss and a hug always, and she knows he'll have every happiness. She's so thankful for his friendship. Her magic man. He's her sweet clown. She has actually driven over here and, finding him gone, left the note for him, folded under the door knocker—her pink notepaper, with the little tangle of flowers at the top. She wants him to call her, come by as soon as he can to help celebrate. *Please,* she says. *I want to give you a big hug.* He read this and then walked out to stand on the sidewalk and look at the cake in its place on the backseat of the car.

5 "Good God," he said. He'd thought he would put the clown outfit on, deliver the cake in person in the evening; an elaborate proposal to a girl he's never

even kissed. He's a little unbalanced, and he knows it. Over the months of their working together for the county government, he's built up tremendous feelings of loyalty and yearning toward her. He thought she felt something, too. He interpreted gestures—her hand lingering on his shoulder when he made her laugh; her endearments to him, tinged as they seemed to be with a kind of sadness, as if she were afraid for what the world might do to someone so romantic.

"You sweet clown," she said. And she said it a lot. And she talked to him about her ongoing trouble, the guy she'd been in love with who kept waffling about getting married. He wanted no commitments. Tandolfo, aka Rodney Wilbury, told her that he hated men who weren't willing to run the risks of love. Why, he personally was the type who'd always believed in marriage and children, lifelong commitments. He had caused difficulties for himself and life was a disappointment so far, but he believed in falling in love and starting a family. She didn't hear him. It all went right through her like white noise on the radio. For weeks he had come around to visit her, had invited her to watch him perform. She confided in him, and he thought of movies where the friend sticks around and is a good listener, and eventually gets the girl. They fall in love. He put his hope in that. He was optimistic; he'd ordered and bought the cake. Apparently the whole time, all through the listening and being noble with her, she thought of it as nothing more than friendship, accepting it from him because she was accustomed to being offered friendship.

Now he leans close to the mirror to look at his own eyes through the makeup. They look clear enough. "Loves you absolutely not. You must be crazy. You must be the great Tandolfo."

Yes.

Twenty-six-year-old, out-of-luck Tandolfo. In love. With a great oversized cake in the backseat of his car. It's Sunday, a cool April day. He's a little inebriated. That's the word he prefers. It's polite; it suggests something faintly silly. Nothing could be sillier than to be dressed like this in the broad daylight, and to go driving across the bridge into Virginia to put on a magic show. Nothing could be sillier than to have spent all that money on a completely useless purchase—a cake six tiers high. Maybe fifteen pounds of sugar.

When he has made his last check of the clown face in the mirror, and 10
the bag of tricks and props, he goes to his front door and stands at the screen looking out at the architectural shadow of it in the backseat. The inside of the car will smell like icing for days. He'll have to keep the windows open even if it rains; he'll go to work smelling like confectionery delights. The whole thing makes him laugh. A wedding cake. He steps out of the house and makes his way in the late-afternoon sun down the sidewalk to the car. As if they have been waiting for him, three boys come skating down from the top of the hill. He has the feeling that if he tried to sneak out like this at two in the morning, someone would come by and see him anyway. "Hey, Rodney," one boy says. "I mean Tandolfo."

Tandolfo recognizes him. A neighborhood boy, a tough. Just the kind to make trouble, just the kind with no sensitivity to the suffering of others. "Leave me alone or I'll turn you into spaghetti," he says.

"Hey, guys—it's Tandolfo the Great." The boy's hair is a bright blond color, and you can see through it to his scalp.

"Scram," Tandolfo says. "Really."

"Aw, what's your hurry, man?"

"I've just set off a nuclear device," Tandolfo says with grave seriousness. "It's on a timer. Poof."

"Do a trick for us," the blond one says. "Where's that scurvy rabbit of yours?"

"I gave it the week off." Someone, last winter, poisoned the first Chi-Chi. He keeps the cage indoors now. "I'm in a hurry. No rabbit to help with the driving."

But they're interested in the cake now. "Hey, what's that in your car? Is that what I think it is?"

"Just stay back."

"Is that a cake, man? Is that real?"

Tandolfo gets his cases into the trunk, and hurries to the driver's side door. The three boys are peering into the backseat.

"Hey, man. A cake. Can we have a piece of cake?"

"Back off," Tandolfo says.

The white-haired one says, "Come on, Tandolfo."

"Hey, Tandolfo, I saw some guys looking for you, man. They said you owed them money."

He gets in, ignoring them. He starts the car.

"You sucker," one of them says.

"Hey, man. Who's the cake for?"

He drives away, thinks of himself leaving them in a cloud of exhaust. Riding through the green shade, he glances in the rear-view mirror and sees the clown face, the painted smile. It makes him want to laugh. He tells himself he's his own cliché—a clown with a broken heart. Looming behind him is the cake, like a passenger in the backseat.

He drives slow. He has always believed viscerally that gestures mean everything. When he moves his hands and brings about the effects that amaze little children, he feels larger than life, unforgettable. He learned the magic while in high school, as a way of making friends, and though it didn't really make him any friends, he's been practicing it ever since. It's an extra source of income, and lately income has had a way of disappearing too quickly. He's been in some trouble—betting the horses; betting the sports events. He's hungover all the time. There have been several polite warnings at work. He's managed so far to tease everyone out of the serious looks, the cool evaluative study of his face. The fact is, people like him in an abstract way, the way they like distant clownish figures: the comedian whose name they

can't remember. He can see it in their eyes. Even the rough characters after his loose change have a certain sense of humor about it. He's a phenomenon, a subject of conversation.

There's traffic on Key Bridge, and he's stuck for a while. It becomes clear that he'll have to go straight to the birthday party. Sitting behind the wheel of the car with his cake on the backseat, he becomes aware of people in other cars noticing him. In the car to his left, a girl stares, chewing gum. She waves, rolls her window down. Two others are with her, one in the backseat. "Hey," she says. He nods. Smiles inside what he knows is the painted smile. His teeth will look dark against the makeup.

"Where's the party?" she says.

But the traffic moves again. He concentrates. The snarl is on the other side of the bridge—construction of some kind. He can see the cars lined up, waiting to go up the hill into Roslyn and beyond. Time is beginning to be a consideration. In his glove box, he has a flask of bourbon. He reaches over and takes it out, looks around himself. No police anywhere. Just the idling cars and people tuning their radios or arguing or simply staring out as if at some distressing event. The smell of the cake is making him woozy. He takes a swallow of the bourbon, then puts it back. The car with the girls in it goes by him in the left lane, and they are not even looking at him. He watches them go on ahead. He's in the wrong lane again; he can't remember a time when his lane was the only one moving. He told her once that he considered himself in the race of people who gravitate to the nonmoving lanes of highways, and who cause traffic lights to turn yellow by approaching them. She took the idea and carried it out a little—saying she was of the race of people who emitted enzymes which instilled a sense of impending doom in marriageable young men, and made them wary of long-term relationships.

"No," Tandolfo/Rodney said. "I'm living proof that isn't so. I have no such fear, and I'm with you."

"But you're of the race of people who make mine relax all the enzymes." 35

"You're not emitting the enzymes now, I see."

"No," she said. "It's only with marriageable young men."

"I emit enzymes that prevent people like you from seeing that I'm a marriageable young man."

"I'm too relaxed to tell," she said, and touched his shoulder. A plain affectionate moment that gave him tossing nights and fever.

Because of the traffic, he arrives late at the birthday party. He gets out of 40 the car and two men come down from the house to greet him. He keeps his face turned away, remembering too late the breath mints in his pocket.

"Jesus," one of the men says. "Look at this. Hey—who comes out of the cake? This is a kid's birthday party."

"The cake stays."

"What does he mean, it stays? Is that a trick?"

They're both looking at him. The one spoken to must be the birthday boy's father—he's wearing a party cap that says DAD. He has long dirty-looking strands of blond hair jutting out from the cap, and there are streaks of sweaty grit on the sides of his face. "So you're the Great Tandolfo," he says, extending a meaty red hand. "Isn't it hot in that makeup?"

"No, sir."

"We've been playing volleyball."

"You've exerted yourselves."

They look at him. "What do you do with the cake?" the one in the DAD cap asks.

"Cake's not part of the show, actually."

"You just carrying it around with you?"

The other man laughs. He's wearing a T-shirt with a smile face on the chest. "This ought to be some show," he says.

They all make their way across the street and the lawn, to the porch of the house. It's a big party—bunting everywhere and children gathering quickly to see the clown.

"Ladies and gentlemen," says the man in the DAD cap. "I give you Tandolfo the Great."

Tandolfo isn't ready yet. He's got his cases open, but he needs a table to put everything on. The first trick is where he releases the bird. He'll finish with the best trick, in which the rabbit appears as if from a pan of flames: it always draws a gasp, even from the adults; the fire blooms in the pan, down goes the "lid"—it's the rabbit's tight container—the latch is tripped, and the skin of the "lid" lifts off. *Voilà!* Rabbit. The fire is put out by the fireproof cage bottom. He's gotten pretty good at making the switch, and if the crowd isn't too attentive—as children often are not—he can perform certain hand tricks with some style. But he needs a table, and he needs time to set up.

The whole crowd of children is seated in front of the door into the house. He's standing here on the porch, his back to the stairs, and he's been introduced.

"Hello, boys and girls," he says, and bows. "Tandolfo needs a table."

"A table," one of the women says. All the adults are ranged against the porch wall, behind the children. He sees light sweaters, shapely hips, and wild tresses; he sees beer cans in tight fists and heavy jowls, bright ice-blue eyes. A little row of faces, and one elderly face. He feels more inebriated than he likes now, and he tries to concentrate.

"Mommy, I want to touch him," one child says.

"Look at the cake," says another, who's sitting on the railing to Tandolfo's right, with a new pair of shiny binoculars trained on the car. "Do we get some cake?"

"There's cake," says the man in the DAD cap. "But not that cake. Get down, Ethan."

"I want that cake."

"Get down. This is Teddy's birthday."

"Mommy, I want to touch him."

"I need a table, folks. I told somebody that over the telephone."

"He did say he needed a table. I'm sorry," says a woman who is probably 65
the birthday boy's mother. She's quite pretty, leaning in the doorframe with a sweater tied to her waist.

"A table," says another woman. Tandolfo sees the birthmark on her mouth, which looks like a stain. He thinks of this woman as a child in school, with this difference from other children, and his heart goes out to her.

"I need a table," he says to her, his voice as gentle as he can make it.

"What's he going to do, perform an operation?" says DAD.

It amazes Tandolfo how easily people fall into talking about him as though he were an inanimate object, or something on a television screen. "The Great Tandolfo can do nothing until he gets a table," he says, with as much mysteriousness and drama as he can muster under the circumstances.

"I want that cake out there," says Ethan, still perched atop the porch rail- 70
ing. The other children start talking about cake and ice cream, and the big cake Ethan has spotted; there's a lot of confusion, and restlessness. One of the smaller children, a girl in a blue dress, comes forward and stands gazing at Tandolfo. "What's your name?" she says, swaying slightly, her hands behind her back.

"Go sit down," he says to her. "We have to sit down or Tandolfo can't do his magic."

In the doorway, two of the men are struggling with a folding card table. It's one of those rickety ones with the skinny legs, and it won't do.

"That's kind of rickety, isn't it?" says the woman with the birthmark.

"I said Tandolfo needs a sturdy table, boys and girls."

There's more confusion. The little girl has come forward and taken hold 75
of his pant leg. She's just standing there holding it, looking at him. "We have to go sit down," he says, bending to her, speaking sweetly, clownlike. "We have to do what Tandolfo wants."

Her small mouth opens wide, as if she's trying to yawn, and with pale blue eyes quite calm and staring she emits a screech, an ear-piercing, non-human shriek that brings everything to a stop. Tandolfo/Rodney steps back, with his amazement and his inebriate heart, and now everyone's gathering around the girl, who continues to scream, less piercing now, her hands fisted at her sides, those blue eyes closed tight.

"What happened?" the man in the DAD cap wants to know. "Where the hell's the magic tricks?"

"I told you all I needed a *table.*"

"Whud you say to her to make her cry?" He indicates the little girl, who is not merely crying but is giving forth a series of broken, grief-stricken howls.

"I want magic tricks," the birthday boy says, loud. "Where's the magic 80
tricks?"

"Perhaps if we moved the whole thing inside," the woman with the birthmark says, fingering her left ear and making a face.

The card table has somehow made its way to Tandolfo, through the confusion and grief. The man in the DAD cap sets it down and opens it.

"There," he says, as if his point is made.

In the next moment, Tandolfo realizes that someone's removed the little girl. Everything's relatively quiet again, though her cries are coming through the walls of one of the rooms inside the house. There are perhaps fifteen children, mostly seated before him; five or six men and women behind them, or kneeling with them. "Okay, now," DAD says. "Tandolfo the Great."

"Hello, little boys and girls," Tandolfo/Rodney says. "I'm happy to be here. Are you glad to see me?" A general uproar goes up. "Well, good," he says. "Because just look what I have in my magic bag." And with a flourish, he brings out the hat from which he will release Witch. The bird is encased inside a fold of shiny cloth, pulsing there. He can feel it. He rambles on, talking fast, or trying to, and when the time comes to reveal the bird, he almost flubs it. But Witch flaps his wings and makes enough of a commotion to distract even the adults, who applaud now, and get the children to applaud. "Isn't that wonderful," Tandolfo hears. "Where did that bird come from?"

"He had it hidden away," says the birthday boy.

"Now," Tandolfo says, "for my next spell, I need a little friend from the audience." He looks right at the birthday boy—round face, short nose, freckles. Bright red hair. Little green eyes. The whole countenance speaks of glutted appetites and sloth. This kid could be on Roman coins, an emperor. He's not used to being compelled to do anything, but he seems eager for a chance to get into the act. "How about you?" Tandolfo says to him.

The others, led by their parents, cheer.

The birthday boy gets to his feet and makes his way over the bodies of the other children to stand with Tandolfo. In order for the trick to work, Tandolfo must get everyone watching the birthday boy, and there's a funny hat he keeps in the bag for this purpose. "Now," he says to the boy, "since you're part of the show, you have to wear a costume." He produces the hat as if from behind the boy's ear. Another cheer goes up. He puts the hat on his head and adjusts it, crouching down. The green eyes stare impassively at him; there's no hint of awe or fascination in them. "There we are," he says. "What a handsome fellow."

But the birthday boy takes the hat off.

"No, no. We have to wear the hat to be onstage."

"Ain't a stage," the boy says.

"Well, but hey," Tandolfo says for the benefit of the adults. "Didn't you know that all the world's a stage?" He tries to put the hat on again, but the boy moves from under his reach and slaps his hand away. "We have to wear the hat," Tandolfo says, trying to control his anger. "We can't do the magic without our magic hats." He tries once more, and the boy waits until the hat is on, then simply removes it and holds it behind him, shying away

when Tandolfo tries to retrieve it. The noise of the others now sounds like the crowd at a prizefight; there's a contest going on, and they're enjoying it. "Give Tandolfo the hat now. We want magic, don't we?"

"Do the magic," the boy demands.

"I'll do the magic if you give me the hat."

"I won't."

Nothing. No support from the adults. Perhaps if he weren't a little tipsy, perhaps if he didn't feel ridiculous and sick at heart and forlorn, with his wedding cake and his odd mistaken romance, his loneliness, which he has always borne gracefully and in humor, and his general dismay; perhaps if he were to find it in himself to deny the sudden, overwhelming sense of the unearned affection given this little slovenly version of stupid complacent spoiled satiation standing before him—he might've simply gone on to the next trick.

Instead, he leans down and in the noise of the moment, says to the boy, "Give me the hat, you little prick."

The green eyes widen slightly.

It grows quiet. Even the small children can tell that something's happened to change everything.

"Tandolfo has another trick," Rodney says, "where he makes the birthday boy pop like a balloon. Especially if he's a fat birthday boy."

A stirring among the adults.

"Especially if he's an ugly little slab of flesh like this one here."

"Now just a minute," says DAD.

"Pop," Rodney says to the birthday boy, who drops the hat and then, seeming to remember that defiance is expected, makes a face. Sticks out his tongue. Rodney/Tandolfo is quick with his hands by training, and he grabs the tongue.

"Awk," the boy says. "Aw-aw-aw."

"Abracadabra." Rodney lets go, and the boy falls backward into the lap of one of the older children. "Whoops, time to sit down," says Rodney.

Very quickly, he's being forcibly removed. They're rougher than gangsters. They lift him, punch him, tear at his costume—even the women. Someone hits him with a spoon. The whole scene boils out onto the lawn, where someone has released the case that Chi-Chi was in. Chi-Chi moves about wide-eyed, hopping between running children, evading them, as Tandolfo the Great cannot evade the adults. He's being pummeled, because he keeps trying to return for his rabbit. And the adults won't let him off the curb.

"Okay," he says finally, collecting himself. He wants to let them know he's not like this all the time; wants to say it's circumstances, grief, personal pain hidden inside seeming brightness and cleverness; he's a man in love, humiliated, wrong about everything. He wants to tell them, but he can't speak for a moment, can't even quite catch his breath. He stands in the middle of the street, his funny clothes torn, his face bleeding, all his magic

strewn everywhere. "I would at least like to collect my rabbit," he says, and is appalled at the absurd sound of it—its huge difference from what he intended to say. He straightens, pushes the hair out of his eyes, adjusts the clown nose, and looks at them. "I would say that even though I wasn't as patient as I could've been, the adults have not comported themselves well here," he says.

"Drunk," one of the women says.

Almost everyone's chasing Chi-Chi now. One of the older boys approaches him, carrying Witch's case. Witch looks out the air hole, impervious, quiet as an idea. And now one of the men, someone Tandolfo hasn't noticed before, an older man clearly wearing a hairpiece, brings Chi-Chi to him. "Bless you," Rodney says, staring into the man's sleepy, deploring gaze.

"I don't think we'll pay you," the man says. The others are all filing back into the house, herding the children before them.

Rodney speaks to the man. "The rabbit appears out of fire."

The man nods. "Go home and sleep it off, kid."

"Right, thank you."

He puts Chi-Chi in his compartment, stuffs everything in its place in the trunk. Then he gets in and drives away. Around the corner he stops, wipes off what he can of the makeup; it's as if he's trying to remove the grime of bad opinion and disapproval. Nothing feels any different. He drives to the little suburban street where she lives with her parents, and by the time he gets there it's almost dark. The houses are set back in the trees; he sees lighted windows, hears music, the sound of children playing in the yards. He parks the car and gets out. A breezy April dusk.

"I am Tandolfo the soft-hearted," he says. "Hearken to me." Then he sobs. He can't believe it. "Jeez," he says. "Goddam."

He opens the back door of the car, leans in to get the cake. He'd forgotten how heavy it is. Staggering with it, making his way along the sidewalk, intending to leave it on her doorstep, he has an inspiration. Hesitating only for the moment it takes to make sure there are no cars coming, he goes out and sets it down in the middle of the street.

Part of the top sags slightly, from having bumped his shoulder as he pulled it off the backseat of the car. The bride and groom are almost supine, one on top of the other. He straightens them, steps back, and looks at it. In the dusky light, it looks blue. It sags just right, with just the right angle, expressing disappointment and sorrow.

Yes, he thinks. This is the place for it. The aptness of it, sitting out like this, where anyone might come by and splatter it all over creation, actually makes him feel some faint sense of release, as if he were at the end of a story. Everything will be all right if he can think of it that way. He's wiping his eyes, thinking of moving to another town. There are money troubles and troubles at

work, and failures beginning to catch up to him, and he's still aching in love. He thinks how he has suffered the pangs of failure and misadventure, but in this painful instance there's symmetry, and he will make the one eloquent gesture—leaving a wedding cake in the middle of the road, like a sugar-icinged pylon. Yes.

He walks back to the car, gets in, pulls it around, and backs into the driveway of the house across the street. Leaving the engine idling, he rolls the window down and rests his arm on the sill, gazing at the incongruous shape of it there in the falling dark. He feels almost glad, almost—in some strange inexpressible way—vindicated, and he imagines what she might do if she saw him here. In a moment he's fantasizing that she comes running from her house, calling his name, looking at the cake and admiring it. This fantasy gives way to something else: images of destruction, flying sugar and candy debris. He's quite surprised to find that he wants her to stay where she is, doing whatever she's doing. He realizes with a feeling akin to elation that what he really wants—and for the moment all he really wants—is what he now has: a perfect vantage point from which to watch oncoming cars.

Turning the engine off, he waits, concentrating on the one thing, full of anticipation—dried blood and grime on his face, his hair all on end, his eyes glazed with rage and humiliation—a man imbued with interest, and happily awaiting the results of his labor.

TRY THIS 4.13

Describe as accurately as you can any moment of humiliation or shame—either your own or one you observed. What did you learn from it?

POEMS

THEODORE ROETHKE

I Knew a Woman

I knew a woman, lovely in her bones,
When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them;
Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one:
The shapes a bright container can contain!
Of her choice virtues only gods should speak,

Or English poets who grew up on Greek
(I'd have them sing in chorus, cheek to cheek).

How well her wishes went! She stroked my chin,
She taught me Turn, and Counter-turn, and Stand;
She taught me Touch, that undulant white skin;
I nibbled meekly from her proffered hand;
She was the sickle; I, poor I, the rake,
Coming behind her for her pretty sake
(But what prodigious mowing we did make).

Love likes a gander, and adores a goose:
Her full lips pursed, the errant note to seize;
She played it quick, she played it light and loose;
My eyes, they dazzled at her flowing knees;
Her several parts could keep a pure repose,
Or one hip quiver with a mobile nose
(She moved in circles, and those circles moved).

Let seed be grass, and grass turn into hay:
I'm martyr to a motion not my own;
What's freedom for? To know eternity.
I swear she cast a shadow white as stone.
But who would count eternity in days?
These old bones live to learn her wanton ways:
(I measure time by how a body sways).

CAROLE SIMMONS OLES

Stonecarver

for Father

Don't look at his hands now.
Stiff and swollen, small finger
curled in like a hermit:
needing someone to open the ketchup,
an hour to shave.
That hand held the mallet,
made the marble say
Cicero, Juno, and *laurel.*

Don't think of his eyes
behind thick lenses squinting
at headlines, his breath

drowning in stonedust and Camels,
his sparrow legs.

Think of the one who slid
3 floors down scaffolding ropes
every lunchtime,
who stood up to Donnelly the foreman
for more time to take care.

Keep him the man in the photo,
straight-backed on the park bench
in Washington, holding hands
with your mother.
Keep his hands holding
calipers, patterns, and pointer,
bringing the mallet down
fair on the chisel,
your father's hands sweeping off dust.

ELIZABETH JENNINGS

One Flesh

Lying apart now, each in a separate bed,
He with a book, keeping the light on late,
She like a girl dreaming of childhood,
All men elsewhere—it is as if they wait
Some new event: the book he holds unread,
Her eyes fixed on the shadows overhead,

Tossed up like flotsam from a former passion,
How cool they lie. They hardly ever touch,
Or if they do it is like a confession
Of having little feeling—or too much.
Chastity faces them, a destination
For which their whole lives were a preparation.

Strangely apart, yet strangely close together,
Silence between them like a thread to hold
And not wind in. And time itself's a feather
Touching them gently. Do they know they're old,
These two who are my father and my mother
Whose fire from which I came, has now grown cold?

TRY THIS 4.14
Using at least one direct (of the senses) and one indirect (telling) method, write a brief characterization of one or both of your parents, in any form of prose or poetry.

KAYLIN HAUGHT

God Says Yes to Me

I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic
and she said yes
I asked her if it was okay to be short
and she said it sure is
I asked her if I could wear nail polish
or not wear nail polish
and she said honey
she calls me that sometimes
she said you can do just exactly
what you want to
Thanks God I said
And is it even okay if I don't paragraph
my letters
Sweetcakes God said
who knows where she picked that up
what I'm telling you is
Yes Yes Yes

TRY THIS 4.15
Go to YouTube and type in "God Says Yes to Me." Search among the various versions for a while. Write a poem about what God (or a god) says to you.

MOLLY CAMPBELL

Telephone Bob

A comedy in one act

Characters

LILLY, 40's
MARGARET, 70's, Her Mother
TELEPHONE BOB

SETTING: The stage represents three areas: Lilly's house, Margaret's retirement home and Bob's office. There are four phones.

(LIGHTS UP on LILLY as she picks up the phone, dials. BOB picks up.)

BOB: Hello, thank you for using Telephone BOB, your full-service telephone company. At Telephone BOB, we don't just patch you through, we help you with every step of the conversation, making your telephone experience the best it can be.

LILLY: Uhh...is this a recording?

BOB: Of course not. At Telephone BOB, we use only highly-trained live operators. How may I help you?

LILLY: Uh...I'm trying to reach my mother. Her name is Margaret Verner at 555—

BOB: No need to recite that pesky number. I've already got it. Hold on while I connect you.

(BOB picks up a second phone, dials. MARGARET picks up.)

MARGARET: Hello?

BOB: Hello, this is Telephone BOB, your full-service telephone company. You have a call from your daughter, Lilly.

LILLY: Hey, I didn't tell you my name!

BOB: May I connect the call?

MARGARET: You might as well.

BOB: Hold on please.

(To LILLY)

The party, Margaret Verner, has accepted your call.

LILLY: It's about time. Mom? Mom, are you there?

(BOB goes back and forth with the two phones, interceding the conversation both ways.)

BOB: *(To Margaret)* Hello, mother, I'm glad I caught you at home.

MARGARET: Where else would I be? They practically keep me locked up in this place.

BOB: *(To LILLY)* Of course I'm home, under the highly qualified staff's constant, round-the-clock care and supervision.

LILLY: They'd better. We're not paying twenty-five hundred a month for nothing.

BOB: Sounds like we're getting our money's worth out of that retirement facility.

MARGARET: It would be better if you'd remember to call me every week like you said you would.

BOB: I really look forward to our Sunday calls.

LILLY: I hope you're not sore about me missing last week. Things just got busy and kind of out-of-control here.

BOB: I'm terribly sorry I missed you last week. I know how important these calls are to you.

MARGARET: If you think I sit around all day waiting for the phone to ring, you got another thing coming. Let's face it, Lilly, I have better things to do.

BOB: It's okay. I've been very busy myself.

LILLY: Oh? Bingo night at the seniors club?

BOB: Have you been active in that seniors group?

MARGARET: That group of nosey old ladies?

BOB: I've made lots of exciting new friends who stay current on all the latest happenings.

LILLY: Sounds like you'll fit in just fine.

BOB: I'm glad to hear you're making friends.

MARGARET: Hardly. All they do is brag about how often their kids call them. That JoAnn Ledbetter says her son calls her every night.

BOB: Mostly they talk about their children. Did you know JoAnn Ledbetter has a very thoughtful son?

LILLY: That's nice, Mom. You must think I'm horrible.

BOB: I feel horrible. I promise I'll call you more. Okay?

MARGARET: Forget about it. What is it this time? Are you and David short on cash again?

BOB: I'm okay. How are you and David doing? I hope my expenses here aren't too much of a burden.

LILLY: We're fine. David's supposed to get a raise soon.

BOB: We're great. David just got a nice raise.

MARGARET: It's about time, with all that relocating his company puts him through. Let me tell you, all that moving around is not good for you, Lilly.

BOB: I hope you're all getting settled in. That change of scenery must be pretty exciting.

LILLY: Let's put it this way, if there's an armpit of the universe, we're here.
BOB: Well, it's not home, but I think we're going to do okay.
MARGARET: Until that husband of yours gets another bee in his bonnet.
BOB: How is David?
LILLY: Oh, David. He's back in AA again.
BOB: He's active in a community group of like-minded individuals.
MARGARET: That sounds like a cult. You're not joining a cult, are you, Lilly?
BOB: That sounds very cultured. You and David are always trying out new things.
LILLY: Mom, this isn't new. It's his third try. I just hope he can actually finish the steps this time.
BOB: Even though he's tried the program twice before with limited success, this time I'm positive he's going to reach the highest level.
MARGARET: That's nice, dear. How about the kids? How are they?
BOB: How about Leon and Susie? How are they?
LILLY: Leon recently won third place in a drag queen contest.
BOB: Leon recently won third place in a popular fashion event.
MARGARET: Hummm. *Only* third place?
BOB: Third place? That's impressive. I bet there was a lot of competition.
LILLY: Oh, there was. Him and all his gay little friends.
BOB: It was a very friendly atmosphere.
MARGARET: I bet it was. What about Susie? How is she?
BOB: How about Susie? What's my favorite granddaughter up to these days?
LILLY: Oh, Susie. She just got arrested for selling meth.
BOB: Susie's entrepreneurial skills may land her a full-time position in a community center.
MARGARET: That sounds interesting. I'll put in a special prayer for her at church.
BOB: I'll be praying for her.
LILLY: I know you will, mom. That's all you ever do.
BOB: We appreciate you keeping us in your thoughts.
MARGARET: And speaking of prayer, are you going to church like you're supposed to?
BOB: Speaking of prayer, have you and David found a church?
LILLY: Mom! Don't start in with me. I'll go to church when and if I feel like.
BOB: David and I are keeping our options open.
MARGARET: That's a start.
BOB: I'm glad to hear you're considering it.
LILLY: Yeah, yeah, sure, Mom.
BOB: Yes.
MARGARET: Well, I suppose you're ready to get off the phone. You always are as soon as I mention church.
BOB: Well, I suppose I'd better let you go.

LILLY: Yeah. I only got a million other things to do. Hey, it's been nice talking to you. Not one argument. That's a nice change.

BOB: Yeah. I got to get dinner started here. It's been nice talking to you.

MARGARET: Same here.

BOB: Of course. I always enjoy hearing from you.

LILLY: I promise I won't forget to call you next week.

BOB: I promise I'll call you again next week.

MARGARET: Only if the good Lord lets me live that long.

BOB: I'll be here.

(There's a BEEP as BOB direct connects MARGARET and LILLY. BOB exits.)

LILLY: Well, bye, Mom. I'll call you next week.

MARGARET: I'm looking forward to it. You take care, hear?

LILLY: We will. I love you.

MARGARET: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I love you, too, and all of that.

(MARGARET and LILLY hang up their phones. They each reflect on their conversation as LIGHTS FADE.)

END OF PLAY

TRY THIS 4.16

Write a short monologue for a character who has done something illegal, immoral, gross, or unkind. Make us sympathize.

WORKING TOWARD A DRAFT

Pick a character who interests you from one of your journal pieces (fictional, observed, well-known to you—it doesn't matter), and write a letter from this person to yourself, beginning: "You think you know me, but what you don't know about me is...." Write fast. Don't think too much. Let it flow.

CHAPTER 5

Setting

- *As the World*
- *As a Camera*
- *As Mood and Symbol*
- *As Action*

"...place is a definer and a confiner of what I'm doing....It saves me. Why, you couldn't write a story that happened nowhere."
Eudora Welty

Gerth Roland/Prisma/age fotostock

WARM-UP

Take a page to paint a picture of this place in words. Use mainly nouns and verbs, a minimum of adjectives and adverbs. Invent the details. Remember smells, tastes, and textures as part of the atmosphere. Where is this? What has happened here? What is the effect of the weather on the scene?

A LOVE OF HOME. A PASSION FOR TRAVEL. THE GRIEF OF EXILE. The fragility of nature. The excitement of the metropolis. A fascination with the past. An obsession with the future. The search to belong. The need to flee. A sense of alienation. The thrill of outer space. The romance of real estate. Fear of the dark. The arctic waste. The swamp. The summit. The sea. The slums. The catacombs. The palace. The rocking chair. The road.

Writer after writer will tell you that **setting** fuels the drive to write. Virtually any writer you ask will profess a profound relation to place and time, whether as patriot, refugee, homebody, adventurer, flâneur, or time traveler; and each will tell you that creating the sensuous particularity of a place and period is crucial to writing. Setting is not merely scenery against which the significant takes place: It is part and parcel of the significant, it is heritage and culture, it is identity or exile. And the writer's choice of detail directs our understanding and our experience of it.

> *Like so many Americans raised in suburbia [Deborah Tall writes], I have never really belonged to an American landscape....The land's dull tidiness was hard to escape, except in the brief adventures of childhood when I could crawl beneath a bush or clothe myself in a willow tree. Before long, tall enough to look out the kitchen window, I saw the tree tamed by perspective, the bush that could be hurdled, my yard effectively mimicked all up and down the block: one house, two trees, one house, two trees, all the way to the vanishing point.*
>
> "Here"

In rejecting the suburban landscape as her rightful home, Tall creates its oppressive tidiness for us, its suggestive or even symbolic importance to her sense of the "vanishing point." Though the description is of a deliberately static scene, the forceful verbs—*escape, crawl, clothe, tame, hurdle, mimic*—carry the energy of her desire to be gone from it. And readers can connect with the pictures and emotions she evokes in many ways: the image of suburbia itself, the childhood desire to hide, the changing perspective as she grows, the need for independence. For myself—though I grew up in the desert and would have been grateful for two trees—I powerfully identify with the sense of knowing, even as a child, that the place I lived was not the place I belonged, and with the implication that this sense of exile is common among writers.

If a piece of literature does not create the setting for us, if it seems to occur in no-place/no-time or in vague-place/fuzzy-time, we cannot experience it, or else we must experience that vagueness itself as crucial to the action. Samuel Butler's Utopia is set in *Erewhon* (*nowhere* spelled backward) because the point of such a place, where philosophers reign and children select their parents, is that it cannot exist. Tom Stoppard's heroes in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* do not know where they are, or where they came from,

or where the sun comes up, or what time it is, and therefore *do not know who they are.*

Yet there's a resistance and even a measure of boredom that greets the subject of setting, and I can think of at least two reasons for this. The first is that tedious and sentimental descriptions of nature tend to be part of our early schooling, operating as a sort of admonishment that we should pay less attention to Mickey Mouse and Beyoncé, and more to the (ho-hum) wonders of nature. The other is that in daily life we take our surroundings 90 percent for granted. The world you know is what you're told to write about. What's the big deal? Isn't it everybody's world? Well, no.

Setting as the World

Don't think that any place is "typical."

Steven Schoen

Your routine, your neighborhood, your take on home, history, climate, and the cosmos is unique, like your voice, and inseparable from your voice. As a writer you need to be alert to your own vision and to create for us, even make strange to us, the world you think most familiar. Richard Ford demonstrates the technique in his description of "Seminary Street" in the novel *Independence Day*:

> *The 4th is still three days off, but traffic is jamming into Frenchy's Gulf and through the parking lot at Pelcher's Market, citizens shouting out greetings from the dry cleaners and Town Liquors, as the morning heat is drumming up...all merchants are staging sidewalk "firecracker sales," setting out derelict merchandise they haven't moved since Christmas and draping sun racks with patriotic bunting and gimmicky signs that say wasting hard-earned money is the American way.*

Ford's portrait here of a typical American town is given immediacy and life with names, quotations, and just slightly unexpected diction like *jamming, drumming, staging, "firecracker sales," derelict, sun racks, bunting, gimmicky.* These words and images are deliberate choices on Ford's part to particularize not only the town but our response to it. We may know this street well, but we would not see it well nor would we experience it in any particular way if we were told it was "a typical small town on 4th of July weekend."

If, on the other hand, the world you are writing about is itself in some way exotic, you may want to work in the opposite direction, to make it seem as familiar to us as the nearest mall.

> *A server is woken at hour four-thirty by stimulin in the airflow, then yellow-up in our dormroom. After a minute in the hygiener and steamer, we put on fresh uniforms before filing into the restaurant. Our seer and aides*

gather us around Papa's Plinth for Matins, we recite the Six Catechisms, then our beloved Logoman appears and delivers his Sermon.

Cloud Atlas, *David Mitchell*

Here, the familiar tone and casual delivery help readers accept the futuristic setting as the norm, at least for the duration of this fiction, in spite of the unusual words.

TRY THIS 5.1

Draw the floor plan of the first house you remember living in. Take a mental tour through this house, pausing (and marking on the floor plan) where significant events occurred. Walk through again, making a list of these events. Pick one of them and write about it. Pay attention to the setting and the atmosphere of the event. How does your relation to the space, light, weather, walls, furniture, and objects affect what you are doing and feeling? Does the place represent safety or confinement?

Description has earned a bad rap with overlong, self-indulgent eulogies to wildflowers, furniture, or alien planets. But setting involves everything that supports and impinges on your characters. The props of the world—artifacts and architecture, infrastructure, books, food, fabrics, tools and technology—create and sustain identity. People behaving in relation to their surroundings define both space and time, and reveal much more.

Take the example of a simple stage setting. The stage is bare; it could represent anywhere at any time. Now place on it an ordinary straight-backed chair. What portion of history is now eliminated? How much of the contemporary world can the setting now *not* represent—in what portion of the planet do people not sit on chairs? You don't know the answer. Neither do I. That neither of us knows the answer proves how particular and limited is our vision of the world.

A male actor enters the space. He sits in the chair. He holds his arms and head rigid, as if strapped. Where is he now? What will happen? Or he sweeps in and sits, miming the flinging aside of his robe. Where is he now? To what tradition does the scene belong? He drops a briefcase, slumps in the chair, and slips off his shoes, with a toe on the heel of each. Where? What is he feeling? Or he sets the briefcase down, opens it, removes something, clears a space before him, and begins to study, frowning. Where? Who is he? He tips back, one fist over the other in front of him, fighting the pull of the thing in his hands. Where? How much do you know about him? He kneels in front of the chair, one hand on his heart. What is he up to? He stands on the chair, fingering his neck, eyeing the ceiling. What is he thinking?

The male actor exits. A female actor enters. What does *she* do in relation to the chair? Which of the above actions would she not be likely to perform? What would she do that he would not?

Each of these actions, in relation to the absolute rock-bottom, simplest setting, represents a narrowing of possibility, an intensifying of situation, a range of emotions, and a shape of story. Each depends on the historical, geographical, psychological, and narrative potential that we have learned throughout a lifetime. Dancers have been so enamored of these possibilities that the use of chairs in dance has become a cliché. When a playwright wishes to indicate the most minimal set imaginable, she will usually indicate something like *bare stage, three chairs.*

TRY THIS 5.2

Write a paragraph or a poem describing a particular chair. Interest us in this chair. Do not tell us how you feel about it, but choose the details, mostly nouns and verbs, so that *we* know.

If you like, write a second paragraph about a person who sits in this chair. Do not tell us how he/she feels about it, but choose the details, mostly nouns and verbs, so that *we* know.

In choosing the most minimal stage set, the playwright is relying on the body and mobility of the actor to create the world around the chair, and those things represent a powerful collaborative presence. If your medium is poetry, essay, or fiction, you need to supply the whole of that vitality in words. Think of your characters as the point and center of what you write. Setting is everything else. It is the world. You need to make that world for us even as you present your characters, in order to let us care about them. Novelist and short-story writer Ron Carlson nicely catches the necessity and the priority:

> *...[I]f the story is about a man and a woman changing a tire on a remote highway...you've nonetheless got to convince me of the highway, the tire, the night, the margin, the shoulder, the gravel under their knees, the lug nuts, the difficulty getting the whole thing apart and back together, and the smells. You must do that. But that's not what you're there to deliver. That's the way you're going to seduce me...after you've got my shirt caught in the machine of the story and you've drawn me in, what you're really going to crush me with are these hearts and these people. Who are they?*
>
> Interview with Ron Carlson by *Susan McInnis*

The techniques of setting—"the machine of the story"—are those you have already encountered as image and voice. Create a place by the selection of concrete detail, in your particular diction or that of your narrating character. When you focus on offering us the particularity of place, time, and weather, you will also be able to manipulate the mood, reveal the character, and advance the action.

The details you choose to evoke place will also, if you choose them well, signal the period. Albert Einstein invented the word *chronotope* to indicate the "space-time continuum," or the fact that space and time are different manifestations of the same thing. Metaphorically this is true of imagery, and of the imagery of space and time. You will indicate something about period as well as architecture if your characters live in a *hogan, bungalow, cottage, sod house, split-level,* or *high-rise.* Likewise you will tell us something about where and when we are likely to be if your heroine is carrying a *reticule, porte-monnaie, poke, duffle,* or *fanny pack.*

> *My father walked beside me to give me courage, his palm touching gently the back laces of my bodice. In the low-angled glare already baking the paving stones of the piazza and the top of my head, the still shadow of the Inquisitor's noose hanging above the Tor di Nona, the papal court, stretched grotesquely down the wall, its shape the outline of a tear.*
>
> *"A brief unpleasantness, Artemisia," my father said, looking straight ahead. "Just a little squeezing."*
>
> The Passion of Artemisia, *Susan Vreeland*

This is a voice of relative calm in a situation of high drama. Can you identify the images and the diction that indicate period and locale?

The techniques that convincingly create the world are the same as those that create image and character: Be alert to the sense impressions of your inner eye (remembering that place and time can be created by smells and sounds, by textures, and even tastes as well as the visible). As with character, a single vivid detail may accomplish more than a catalogue. Originality often means a genuine connection with some particularity that you have noticed, and the ability to dream that particularity into your scene, however fictional.

An example from my own ignorance: In a novel set in Mexico in 1914, I needed to establish the threatening atmosphere of a small town. I decided I had better endow the town with a cockfight—everybody knows a cockfight is scary—and went looking for fictional and nonfiction accounts as models. I made notes about factual details, tried several pale drafts, and despaired at the brilliance of Nathanael West and Ernest Hemingway. I'd never seen a cockfight, but I thought my imagination ought to be up to the task. It was not. Then it occurred to me that what frightened *me* in the desert was Gila monsters. I wrote a scene in which an old man with a Gila monster on a leash taunts the town by tossing frogs and snakes that his lizard paralyzes with its venomous tongue. There was more invention required by this scene than the cockfight I'd been trying to write (so far as I know, nobody puts a leash on a Gila monster), but because it came out of my own emotion, feeling, and observation, it moved my character and his story in the direction needed.

TRY THIS 5.3
Write two pages beginning "Get me out of here."

Setting as a Camera

> "...[M]y favorite sentence may be, 'Last Wednesday at the Black Cat Night Club.' I mean, I just love knowing where I am."
>
> *Ron Carlson*

Setting often begins a piece, for the very good reason that this is the first thing we register in life. Entering a place, we take it in as a panorama (sit in a restaurant and watch people enter; their eyes go left and right, even up and down before they fix on the approaching hostess). Waking with the sense "Where am I?" is notoriously disconcerting. It is no less so in literature. This does not mean setting has to be the very first thing writers address, but it does mean that their audience can't go far without some sort of orientation.

As a model, consider the western movie, which typically begins with a *long shot* (the camera at distance) of the horsemen coming over the rise. We get a sense of the landscape, then we see the far-off arrival of the riders. Then there might be a *middle shot*, say four riders in the frame, to give us a sense of the group. Then a *close-up*: This is our hero, his head and shoulders. Screenwriters and directors are taught that they need such an "establishing shot" at the beginning of *each* scene. This parallels the action that often takes place on stage: The curtain opens on an empty room; we register it, read its clues. Someone enters. What is the relationship of this person to this space? Someone else comes in; they begin to talk and the situation is revealed.

Carl Sandburg, in "Good Morning, America," demonstrates the long-shot opening:

> *In the evening there is a sunset sonata to the cities.*
> *There is a march of little armies to the dwindling of drums.*
> *The skyscrapers throw their tall lengths of walls into black bastions on the red west.*

Only after this cityscape, its sound, sight, and time of day, is established does he introduce the puny maker of these great structures, man.

The process of orientation somehow takes place in every piece that tells a story. Consider again the beginning of the Housman poem in the previous chapter:

> *Loveliest of trees, the cherry now*
> *Is hung with snow along the bough*
> *And stands about the woodland ride*
> *Wearing white for Easter tide*

Now of my threescore years and ten
Twenty will not come again...

Notice how this poem follows both the pattern of a film opening and also, incidentally, the "seduction" process that Ron Carlson describes above. Actually, we begin with a middle shot (cherry tree, bough with the snow that tells us the season), pull back to a long shot (woodland ride), and then zoom in on the persona in relation to the scene (my whole life and where I am in it now).

The practice of beginning with a wide angle and moving to closer focus is important for introducing us to an exotic locale:

> *The thin light of the approaching daybreak always seemed to emphasize the strangeness and foreignness of our battalion's bivouac area on a country road outside Casablanca. Every morning a heavy mist covered the land just before the sun rose. Then, as the light grew, odd-looking shapes and things came slowly into view... Dim, moving figures behind the mist, dressed in ghostly white, materialized as Arabs perched on the hindquarters of spindly donkeys or walking along the road.*
>
> "On the Fedala Road," *John McNeel*

But this technique is no less useful for presenting a domestic scene:

> *Throughout my childhood our family's evening meals were expeditious and purposeful, more reliable than imaginative. We were French Canadians, which meant we knew pork and maple syrup. My grandfather liked to eat salt pork, sautéed in a frying pan, or cold, right out of the fridge, with a schmear of horseradish, a side of string beans, and a bottle of Tadcaster ale.*
>
> "Nothing to Eat but Food: Menu as Memoir," *John Dufresne*

Part of the long shot is temporal here, involving the whole sweep of *throughout my childhood*. Then it places us at table (*evening meals*). The diction also begins on a wide scale, with generalizations (*expeditious, purposeful*) narrowing to an ethnicity and a region (*French Canadians*) and then, comically, to an image (*pork and maple syrup*). The character of grandfather is introduced and the close-up begins, narrowing toward his plate while the details and diction also give us the ethnic oddities of voice and flavor: *sautéed* and *schmear* and *Tadcaster ale.*

TRY THIS 5.4
Pick a scene from your childhood and describe it in three sentences: one long shot, one middle shot, one close-up. How much can you tell us about the feel of your surroundings in this short space?

Of course, it is equally possible, and potentially interesting, to begin with the close-up and then move to middle and long shots—an opening image, say, of a fly crawling up three-days' worth of stubble to disappear into a nostril—only then you had better pull back to show us the bad guy's whole face, and the way he is wedged in the rock, and the wide-sky emptiness of the desert he has to cross. Sandra Cisneros demonstrates the technique in the short story "Salvador Late or Early":

> *Salvador with eyes the color of a caterpillar, Salvador of the crooked hair and crooked teeth, Salvador whose name the teacher cannot remember, is a boy who is no one's friend, runs along somewhere in that direction where homes are the color of bad weather, lives behind a raw wood doorway, shakes the sleepy brothers awake, ties their shoes, combs their hair with water, feeds them milk and corn flakes from a tin cup in the dim dark of morning.*

In this dense miniature portrait, notice how the focus begins on Salvador, then places him in a classroom, then chases him *somewhere in that direction*, so that we know the very vivid images of his poverty are the narrator's invention, impressions of the "dim dark" setting in which he lives.

Or observe, in this excerpt from Michael Ignatieff's memoir, *August in My Father's House*, how a storm is evoked in three sentences—first in middle shot, then close-up, and then sweeping away to a long shot:

> *...A shutter bangs against the kitchen wall and a rivulet of sand trickles from the adobe wall in the long room where I sit. The lamp above my head twirls in the draught. Through the poplars, the forks of light plunge into the flanks of the mountains and for an instant the ribbed gullies stand out like skeletons under a sheet.*

Notice also how the energy of the verbs (some of them personifications) mimic the energy of the storm: *bangs, trickles, twirls, plunge, stand out*, and how the scene is capped with a simile that suggests its malevolence: *ribbed gullies...like skeletons.* So active is this storm and the "camera" swinging to capture it, so forcefully does it suggest the emotion of the narrator, that it's unlikely anyone would refer to it as a "description of nature," though it is also that.

As this example shows, the "camera" may record the scene, but it is a subjective, not an impartial, observer. The angle and distance are, like the details themselves, a choice made by the author that conveys a sense of viewpoint, of *someone* standing *somewhere* to watch the scene. Also, as with a film, the story will continue to move back and forth among long, middle, and close perspectives, for variety's sake and to allow us both orientation and involvement.

TRY THIS 5.5

Pick a scene from your journal. Describe the setting using the pattern *long shot, middle shot, close-up.* Make sure that you begin with a wide sweep and end with a tight focus.

Pick another scene. Begin with a very small, close image. Widen the lens until you have placed that scene in the context of the entire continent.

Setting as Mood and Symbol

> If the atmosphere is to be foreboding, you must forebode on every page. If it is to be cold, you must chill, not once or twice, but until your readers are shivering.
>
> *Jerome Stern*

Each of the previous scenes creates a **mood** or an **atmosphere** for the events that will unfold there—fearful in the Vreeland, majestic in the Sandburg, elegiac in the Housman, mysterious in the McNeel, comic in the Dufresne, poignant in the Cisneros, malevolent in the Ignatieff. (Do you agree with these characterizations? Which words and images are responsible for the mood created?)

Setting in the sense of atmosphere is one of the writer's most adaptable tools. Mood will inevitably contain some element of time and weather—wet or dry, dark or light, winter or summer, calm or storm, and so forth. These, together with the textures and colors of objects, the smells of vegetation, the shapes of buildings, are all rich with the mood from which the unique action and its meaning emerge.

> *When we came back to Paris it was clear and cold and lovely. The city had accommodated itself to winter, there was good wood for sale at the wood and coal place across our street, and there were braziers outside of many of the good cafés so that you could keep warm on the terraces.*
>
> A Moveable Feast, *Ernest Hemingway*

Mood is a state of mind or emotion, and when we speak of setting as mood, we are speaking of an external manifestation of the inner, the concrete expressing the abstract, the contingent standing for the essential. In this sense, setting is often to some degree **symbolic**. It may be deliberately and specifically so, like the deranged planets that stand for the disordered society in *King Lear*, or the subway that is "the flying underbelly of the city... heaped in modern myth" in Imamu Amiri Baraka's play *Dutchman.*

More often, the setting is suggestive of a larger meaning, reaching out from a particular place and time toward a cosmic or universal reading. In this opening passage from Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, a boy is playing hooky to be

at a New York baseball stadium that becomes the symbolic locus of American longing. (Notice the close-up/long-shot/close-up/long-shot structure.)

> *It's a school day, sure, but he's nowhere near the classroom. He wants to be here instead, standing in the shadow of this old rust-hulk of a structure, and it's hard to blame him....*
>
> *Longing on a large scale is what makes history. This is just a kid with a local yearning but he is part of an assembling crowd, anonymous thousands off the buses and trains, people in narrow columns tramping over the swing bridge above the river, and even if they are not a migration or a revolution, some vast shaking of the soul, they bring with them the body heat of a great city and their own small reveries and desperations, the unseen something that haunts the day....*

Our relation to place, time, and weather, like our relation to clothes and other objects, is charged with emotion more or less subtle, more or less profound. It is filled with judgment, mellow or harsh. And it alters according to what happens to us. In some rooms you are always trapped; you enter them with grim purpose and escape them as soon as you can. Others invite you to settle in, to nestle or carouse. Some landscapes lift your spirits; others depress you. Cold weather gives you energy and bounce, or else it clogs your head and makes you huddle, struggling. You describe yourself as a night person or a morning person. The house you loved as a child now makes you, precisely because you were once happy there, think of loss and death.

TRY THIS 5.6

As a prompt for a memoir, poem, or fiction, choose one of the clichés below. Using concrete details rather than the words of the cliché, create the setting suggested by it. You might begin with a single sharply focused image, then pull back to reveal the larger landscape. Use a persona, or introduce a character if you choose.

- a dark and stormy night
- raining cats and dogs
- you could fry an egg on the sidewalk
- pattering on the roof
- cold as a witch's tit
- gonna be a scorcher
- stars like diamonds

The potential for emotion inherent in place, time, and weather can be used or heightened (or invented) to dramatic effect in your writing. Nothing happens nowhere. Just as significant detail calls up a sense impression and

also an abstraction, so setting and atmosphere impart both information and emotion. Just as dialogue must do more than one thing at a time, so can setting characterize, reveal mood, and signal change. Here from Saul Bellow's "Memoir of a Bootlegger's Son" is a picture of the place his father worked after he lost the fortune he brought from Russia:

> *The bakery was a shanty. The rats took refuge from the winter there, and drowned in the oil and fished out suffocated from the jelly. The dogs and cats could not police them, they were so numerous. The thick ice did not float leisurely, it ran the swift current. In March and even April the snow still lay heavy. When it melted, the drains couldn't carry off the water. There were gray lagoons in the hollows of old ice; they were sullen or flashing according to the color of the sky.*

Bellow's choices of imagery here are so rich with mood that they amount to a prophecy: *refuge, drowned, suffocated, heavy, gray, hollows, old ice.* The impotence of dogs and cats, ice, snow, and drains, the lagoons "sullen or flashing according to the color of the sky," convey not only the scene but also the man's loss of self-determination.

TRY THIS 5.7

On the left is a list of times, places, and/or weather. On the right are words that represent a mood or quality of atmosphere. Pick one item from the left and one from the right. Write a poem or paragraph in which you make the setting suggest the atmosphere. If the connection is not obvious, your piece will be more interesting. Introduce a character if you please.

the city in the rain	sinister
midnight on the farm	sick with love
1890, in the parlor	full of promise
high noon on the river	suicidal
a spring morning	dangerous
in the bar, after hours	suspense
the dusty road	happy-go-lucky
dawn in a foreign place	lonely

Setting as Action

If character is the foreground and setting the background, then there may be harmony or conflict between character and background. The persons of your poem, play, memoir, or fiction may be comfortably at ease in the world around them, or they may be uneasy, uncomfortable, full of foreboding.

I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon. A yard like this is more comfortable than most people know. It is not just a yard. It is like an extended living room. When the hard clay is swept clean as a floor and the fine sand around the edges lined with tiny, irregular grooves, anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house.

"Everyday Use," *Alice Walker*

Here the setting is a place full of comfort and community, and any conflict comes from an outside threat to that balance—perhaps, we suspect, the "her" being waited for. But where there is potential menace in the setting, or conflict between the character and the setting, there is already an element of "story."

...The room is so bleak and unwelcoming, he imagines that dozens of desperate people have checked into this place over the years with no other purpose than to commit suicide....The sparseness of the furniture, for example: just one bed and one battered wardrobe stranded in an overly large space. No chair, no phone. The absence of any pictures on the walls. The blank, cheerless bathroom, with a single miniature bar of soap lying in its wrapper on the white sink, a single white hand towel hanging on the rack, the rusted enamel in the white tub.

Man in the Dark, *Paul Auster*

When a character is in harmony with his/her surroundings, the atmosphere suggested is static, and it will take a disruption of some kind to introduce the possibility of change. But when setting and character, background and foreground, are set in opposition to each other, the process of discovery and decision is already in motion, and we know we are in for a seismic or psychic shift.

One great advantage of being a writer is that you may create the world. Places and the elements have the significance and the emotional effect you give them in language. As a person you may be depressed by rain, but as an author you are free to make rain mean freshness, growth, bounty, and God. You may love winter, but you are free to make the blank white field symbolize oblivion.

As with character, the first requisite of effective setting is to know it fully, to experience it mentally; and the second is to create it through significant detail. What sort of place is this, and what are its peculiarities? What is the weather like, the light, the season, the time of day? What are the contours of the land and architecture? What are the social assumptions of the inhabitants, and how familiar and comfortable are the characters with this place and its lifestyle? These things are not less important in literature than in life, but more, since their selection inevitably takes on significance.

TRY THIS 5.8

Take a road map, close your eyes, and point to it at random. Have a character drive or walk through the nearest town and stop in at a bank, shop, or restaurant. Study the surrounding area on the map if you like. Invent the details.

Or:

Write about a place you can't return to.

More to Read

Baxter, Charles. *Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction*. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1997. Print.

Bickham, Jack M. *Setting*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1994. Print.

READINGS

CREATIVE NONFICTION

JOAN DIDION

At the Dam

Since the afternoon in 1967 when I first saw Hoover Dam, its image has never been entirely absent from my inner eye. I will be talking to someone in Los Angeles, say, or New York, and suddenly the dam will materialize, its pristine concave face gleaming white against the harsh rusts and taupes and mauves of that rock canyon hundreds or thousands of miles from where I am. I will be driving down Sunset Boulevard, or about to enter a freeway, and abruptly those power transmission towers will appear before me, canted vertiginously over the tailrace. Sometimes I am confronted by the intakes and sometimes by the shadow of the heavy cable that spans the canyon and sometimes by the ominous outlets to unused spillways, black in the lunar clarity of the desert light. Quite often I hear the turbines. Frequently I wonder what is happening at the dam this instant, at this precise intersection of time and space, how much water is being released to fill downstream orders and what lights are flashing and which generators are in full use and which just spinning free.

I used to wonder what it was about the dam that made me think of it at times and in places where I once thought of the Mindanao Trench, or of the stars wheeling in their courses, or of the words *As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end, amen.* Dams, after all, are commonplace: we have all seen one. This particular dam had existed as an idea in the

world's mind for almost forty years before I saw it. Hoover Dam, showpiece of the Boulder Canyon project, the several million tons of concrete that made the Southwest plausible, the *fait accompli* that was to convey, in the innocent time of its construction, the notion that mankind's brightest promise lay in American engineering.

Of course the dam derives some of its emotional effect from precisely that aspect, that sense of being a monument to a faith since misplaced. "They died to make the desert bloom," reads a plaque dedicated to the 96 men who died building this first of the great high dams, and in context the worn phrase touches, suggests all of that trust in harnessing resources, in the meliorative power of the dynamo, so central to the early Thirties. Boulder City, built in 1931 as the construction town for the dam, retains the ambience of a model city, a new town, a toy triangular grid of green lawns and trim bungalows, all fanning out from the Reclamation building. The bronze sculptures at the dam itself evoke muscular citizens of a tomorrow that never came, sheaves of wheat clutched heavenward, thunderbolts defied. Winged Victories guard the flagpole. The flag whips in the canyon wind. An empty Pepsi-Cola can clatters across the terrazzo. The place is perfectly frozen in time.

But history does not explain it all, does not entirely suggest what makes the dam so affecting. Nor, even, does energy, the massive involvement with power and pressure and the transparent sexual overtones to that involvement. Once when I revisited the dam I walked through it with a man from the Bureau of Reclamation. For a while we trailed behind a guided tour, and then we went on, went into parts of the dam where visitors do not generally go. Once in a while he would explain something, usually in that recondite language having to do with "peaking power," with "outages" and "dewatering," but on the whole we spent the afternoon in a world so alien, so complete and so beautiful unto itself that it was scarcely necessary to speak at all. We saw almost no one. Cranes moved above us as if under their own volition. Generators roared. Transformers hummed. The gratings on which we stood vibrated. We watched a hundred-ton steel shaft plunging down to that place where the water was. And finally we got down to that place where the water was, where the water sucked out of Lake Mead roared through thirty-foot penstocks and then into thirteen-foot penstocks and finally into the turbines themselves. "Touch it," the Reclamation man said, and I did, and for a long time I just stood there with my hands on the turbine. It was a peculiar moment, but so explicit as to suggest nothing beyond itself.

There was something beyond all that, something beyond energy, beyond history, something I could not fix in my mind. When I came up from the dam that day the wind was blowing harder, through the canyon and all across the Mojave. Later, toward Henderson and Las Vegas, there would be dust blowing, blowing past the Country-Western Casino FRI & SAT NITES and blowing past the Shrine of Our Lady of Safe Journey STOP & PRAY, but out at the dam

there was no dust, only the rock and the dam and a little greasewood and a few garbage cans, their tops chained, banging against a fence. I walked across the marble star map that traces a sidereal revolution of the equinox and fixes forever, the Reclamation man had told me, for all time and for all people who can read the stars, the date the dam was dedicated. The star map was, he had said, for when we were all gone and the dam was left. I had not thought much of it when he said it, but I thought of it then, with the wind whining and the sun dropping behind a mesa with the finality of a sunset in space. Of course that was the image I had seen always, seen it without quite realizing what I saw, a dynamo finally free of man, splendid at last in its absolute isolation, transmitting power and releasing water to a world where no one is.

TRY THIS 5.9

Describe in less than two pages some machine, monument or invention that has awed you. Focus on the object; the "author" will emerge.

Or:

Write briefly about some incident in your life in which water played an important part. You needed it, feared it, refused it, immersed yourself in it?

FICTION

DONALD BARTHELME

The School

Well, we had all these children out planting trees, see, because we figured that... that was part of their education, to see how, you know, the root systems...and also the sense of responsibility, taking care of things, being individually responsible. You know what I mean. And the trees all died. They were orange trees. I don't know why they died, they just died. Something wrong with the soil possibly or maybe the stuff we got from the nursery wasn't the best. We complained about it. So we've got thirty kids there, each kid had his or her own little tree to plant, and we've got these thirty dead trees. All these kids looking at these little brown sticks, it was depressing.

It wouldn't have been so bad except that just a couple of weeks before the thing with the trees, the snakes all died. But I think that the snakes—well, the reason that the snakes kicked off was that...you remember, the boiler was shut off for four days because of the strike, and that was explicable. It was something you could explain to the kids because of the strike. I mean, none of their parents would let them cross the picket line and they knew there was

a strike going on and what it meant. So when things got started up again and we found the snakes they weren't too disturbed.

With the herb gardens it was probably a case of overwatering, and at least now they know not to overwater. The children were very conscientious with the herb gardens and some of them probably...you know, slipped them a little extra water when we weren't looking. Or maybe...well, I don't like to think about sabotage, although it did occur to us. I mean, it was something that crossed our minds. We were thinking that way probably because before that the gerbils had died, and the white mice had died, and the salamander...well, now they know not to carry them around in plastic bags.

Of course we *expected* the tropical fish to die, that was no surprise. Those numbers, you look at them crooked and they're belly-up on the surface. But the lesson plan called for tropical-fish input at that point, there was nothing we could do, it happens every year, you just have to hurry past it.

We weren't even supposed to have a puppy.

5

We weren't even supposed to have one, it was just a puppy the Murdoch girl found under a Gristede's truck one day and she was afraid the truck would run over it when the driver had finished making his delivery, so she stuck it in her knapsack and brought it to school with her. So we had this puppy. As soon as I saw the puppy I thought, Oh Christ, I bet it will live for about two weeks and then...And that's what it did. It wasn't supposed to be in the classroom at all, there's some kind of regulation about it, but you can't tell them they can't have a puppy when the puppy is already there, right in front of them, running around on the floor and yap yap yapping. They named it Edgar—that is, they named it after me. They had a lot of fun running after it and yelling, "Here, Edgar! Nice Edgar!" Then they'd laugh like hell. They enjoyed the ambiguity. I enjoyed it myself. I don't mind being kidded. They made a little house for it in the supply closet and all that. I don't know what it died of. Distemper, I guess. It probably hadn't had any shots. I got it out of there before the kids got to school. I checked the supply closet each morning, routinely, because I knew what was going to happen. I gave it to the custodian.

And then there was this Korean orphan that the class adopted through the Help the Children program, all the kids brought in a quarter a month, that was the idea. It was an unfortunate thing, the kid's name was Kim and maybe we adopted him too late or something. The cause of death was not stated in the letter we got, they suggested we adopt another child instead and sent us some interesting case histories, but we didn't have the heart. The class took it pretty hard, they began (I think, nobody ever said anything to me directly) to feel that maybe there was something wrong with the school. But I don't think there's anything wrong with the school, particularly, I've seen better and I've seen worse. It was just a run of bad luck. We had an extraordinary number of parents passing away, for instance. There were I think two heart attacks and two suicides, one drowning, and four killed together in a

car accident. One stroke. And we had the usual heavy mortality rate among the grandparents, or maybe it was heavier this year, it seemed so. And finally the tragedy.

The tragedy occurred when Matthew Wein and Tony Mavrogordo were playing over where they're excavating for the new federal office building. There were all these big wooden beams stacked, you know, at the edge of the excavation. There's a court case coming out of that, the parents are claiming that the beams were poorly stacked. I don't know what's true and what's not. It's been a strange year.

I forgot to mention Billy Brandt's father, who was knifed fatally when he grappled with a masked intruder in his home.

One day, we had a discussion in class. They asked me, where did they go? The trees, the salamander, the tropical fish, Edgar, the poppas and mommas, Matthew and Tony, where did they go? And I said, I don't know, I don't know. And they said, who knows? and I said, nobody knows. And they said, is death that which gives meaning to life? and I said, no, life is that which gives meaning to life. Then they said, but isn't death, considered as a fundamental datum, the means by which the taken-for-granted mundanity of the everyday may be transcended in the direction of—

I said, yes, maybe.

They said, we don't like it.

I said, that's sound.

They said, it's a bloody shame!

I said, it is.

They said, will you make love now with Helen (our teaching assistant) so that we can see how it is done? We know you like Helen.

I do like Helen but I said that I would not.

We've heard so much about it, they said, but we've never seen it.

I said I would be fired and that it was never, or almost never, done as a demonstration. Helen looked out of the window.

They said, please, please make love with Helen, we require an assertion of value, we are frightened.

I said that they shouldn't be frightened (although I am often frightened) and that there was value everywhere. Helen came and embraced me. I kissed her a few times on the brow. We held each other. The children were excited. Then there was a knock on the door, I opened the door, and the new gerbil walked in. The children cheered wildly.

TRY THIS 5.10

Using what you have learned about voice, pick a character who belongs to a certain place—preacher, prisoner, coach, nurse, Little Leaguer, or the like—and write a monologue in which that place is evoked through the voice.

ANGELA CARTER

The Werewolf

It is a northern country; they have cold weather, they have cold hearts.

Cold; tempest; wild beasts in the forest. It is a hard life. Their houses are built of logs, dark and smoky within. There will be a crude icon of the virgin behind a guttering candle, the leg of a pig hung up to cure, a string of drying mushrooms. A bed, a stool, a table. Harsh, brief, poor lives.

To these upland woodsmen, the Devil is as real as you or I. More so; they have not seen us nor even know that we exist, but the Devil they glimpse often in the graveyards, those bleak and touching townships of the dead where the graves are marked with portraits of the deceased in the naïf style and there are no flowers to put in front of them, no flowers grow there, so they put out small, votive offerings, little loaves, sometimes a cake that the bears come lumbering from the margins of the forest to snatch away. At midnight especially on Walpurgisnacht, the Devil holds picnics in the graveyards and invites the witches; then they dig up fresh corpses, and eat them. Anyone will tell you that.

Wreaths of garlic on the doors keep out the vampires. A blue-eyed child born feet first on the night of St John's Eve will have second sight. When they discover a witch—some old woman whose cheeses ripen when her neighbour's do not, another old woman whose black cat; oh, sinister! *follows her about all the time*, they strip the crone, search her for marks, for the supernumary nipple her familiar sucks. They soon find it. Then they stone her to death.

Winter and cold weather.

Go and visit grandmother, who has been sick. Take her the oatcakes I've baked for her on the hearthstone and a little pot of butter.

The good child does as her mother bids—five miles' trudge through the forest; do not leave the path because of the bears, the wild boar, the starving wolves. Here, take your father's hunting knife; you know how to use it.

The child had a scabby coat of sheepskin to keep out the cold, she knew the forest too well to fear it but she must always be on her guard. When she heard that freezing howl of a wolf, she dropped her gifts, seized her knife and turned on the beast.

It was a huge one, with red eyes and running, grizzled chops; any but a mountaineer's child would have died of fright at the sight of it. It went for her throat, as wolves do, but she made a great swipe at it with her father's knife and slashed off its right forepaw.

The wolf let out a gulp, almost a sob, when she saw what had happened to it; wolves are less brave than they seem. It went lolloping off disconsolately between the trees as well as it could on three legs, leaving a trail of blood behind it. The child wiped the blade of her knife clean on her apron, wrapped up the wolf's paw in the cloth in which her mother had packed the oatcakes

and went on towards her grandmother's house. Soon it came on to snow so thickly that the path and any footsteps, track or spoor that might have been upon it were obscured.

She found her grandmother was so sick she had taken to her bed and fallen into a fretful sleep, moaning and shaking so that the child guessed she had a fever. She felt the forehead, it burned. She shook out the cloth from her basket, to use it to make the old woman a cold compress, and the wolf's paw fell to the floor.

But it was no longer a wolf's paw. It was a hand, chopped off at the wrist, a hand toughened with work and freckled with age. There was a wedding ring on the third finger and a wart on the index finger. By the wart, she knew it for her grandmother's hand.

She pulled back the sheet but the old woman woke up, at that, and began to struggle, squawking, and shrieking like a thing possessed. But the child was strong, and armed with her father's hunting knife; she managed to hold her grandmother down long enough to see the cause of her fever. There was a bloody stump where her right hand should have been, festering already.

The child crossed herself and cried out so loud the neighbours heard her and came rushing in. They knew the wart on the hand at once for a witch's nipple; they drove the old woman, in her shift as she was, out into the snow with sticks, beating her old carcass as far as the edge of the forest, and pelted her with stones until she fell down dead.

15 Now the child lived in her grandmother's house; she prospered.

TRY THIS 5.11
Rewrite a fairy tale for the modern "child." Maximum words: 250

POEMS

SHERMAN ALEXIE

At Navajo Monument Valley Tribal School

from the photograph by Skeet McAuley

the football field rises
to meet the mesa. Indian boys
gallop across the grass, against
the beginning of their body.
5 On those Saturday afternoons,
unbroken horses gather to watch

their sons growing larger
in the small parts of the world.
Everyone is the quarterback.

There is no thin man in a big hat
writing down all the names
in two columns: winners and losers.

This is the eternal football game,
Indians versus Indians. All the Skins
in the wooden bleachers, fancydancing,

stomping red dust straight down
into nothing. Before the game is over,
the eighth-grade girls' track team

comes running, circling the field,
their thin and brown legs echoing
wild horses, wild horses, wild horses.

JOHN FREEMAN

Beirut

That rusting water tower collapsing
on its ruin was the movie theater
where you sat in smoky consternation
while James Bond lit his cigarettes.
This mirrored shopping mall selling
push-up jeans and gleaming watches
used to be the market, where you
could buy za'atar for small change.

Here, on this corner, where your
father explained to a gun in his mouth
that he was driving back to the
apartment to pick up the dog you left
behind. Here is the apartment you gave
to the head of the Deuxième Bureau,
because when such a man asked for a
favor, he did not ask, and you did not say no.

This corner, where the sea shines in the
near distance, is where our friend was shot
through the mouth and wondered, as she
lay, if another bullet would come. Over here,
at that shop where we found the mother-of-

pearl table, is the hotel where snipers played
God and the flies on the corpses in the street
rippled when the fallen were merely
wounded, and still fair game. Here,
where everywhere was somewhere else,
and the street signs point to Paris, and the
light is not to be trusted. It has been so
easily redirected. So we orient through
the night, following the wind, listening for
a sudden noise, waiting for the taste of ashes.

PHILIP APPLEMAN

Nobody Dies in the Spring

Nobody dies in the spring
on the Upper West Side:
nobody dies.
On the Upper West Side
we're holding hands with strangers
on the Number 5 bus,
and we're singing the sweet
graffiti on the subway,
and kids are skipping patterns through
the bright haze of incinerators
and beagles and poodles are making a happy
ruin of the sidewalks,
and hot-dog men are racing
their pushcarts down Riverside Drive,
and Con Ed is tearing up Broadway
from Times Square to the Bronx,
and the world is a morning miracle
of sirens and horns and jackhammers
and Baskin-Robbins' 31 kinds of litter
and sausages at Zabar's floating
overhead like blimps—oh,
it is no place for dying, not
on the Upper West Side, in springtime.

There will be a time
for the smell of burning leaves at Barnard,
for milkweed winging silky over Grant's Tomb,
for apples falling to grass in Needle Park;

but not in all this fresh new golden
smog: now there is something
breaking loose in people's chests,
something that makes butchers and bus boys
and our neighborhood narcs and muggers
go whistling in the streets—now
there is something with goat feet out there, not
waiting for the WALK light, piping
life into West End window-boxes,
pollinating weeds around
condemned residential hotels,
and prancing along at the head
of every elbowing crowd on the West Side,
singing:
Follow me—it's Spring—
and nobody dies.

TRY THIS 5.12
Write a "list poem" that pays homage to a place you know. The images may be strung together with "and—and—and" or with any word or prepositional phrase you choose. There should also be some element of action, something moving or doing, passing or becoming.

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA

Nude Interrogation

Did you kill anyone over there? Angelica shifts her gaze from the Janis Joplin poster to the Jimi Hendrix, lifting the pale muslin blouse over her head. The blacklight deepens the blues when the needle drops into the first groove of "All Along the Watchtower." I don't want to look at the floor. *Did you kill anyone? Did you dig a hole, crawl inside, and wait for your target?* Her miniskirt drops into a rainbow at her feet. Sandalwood incense hangs a slow comet of perfume over the room. I shake my head. She unhooks her bra and flings it against a bookcase made of plywood and cinderblocks. *Did you use an M-16, a hand-grenade, a bayonet, or your own two strong hands, both thumbs pressed against that little bird in the throat?* She stands with her left thumb hooked into the elastic of her sky-blue panties. When she flicks off the blacklight, snowy hills rush up to the windows. *Did you kill anyone over there? Are you right-handed or left-handed? Did you drop your gun afterwards? Did you kneel beside the corpse and turn it over?* She's nude against the falling snow. *Yes.* The record spins like a bull's-eye on the far wall of Xanadu. *Yes,* I say. *I was scared of the silence. The night was too big. And afterwards, I couldn't stop looking up at the sky.*

TRY THIS 5.13

Below are some themes associated with setting, suggested by the preceding poems. Pick one, remember or imagine a place it represents in your own experience, and brainstorm a list of things that might be found there—people, activities, images. Write a one-paragraph prose poem based on these images. Use the name of the place as your title, perhaps?

- ghosts of the past live here
- this place has been destroyed
- this is a place of hope and life
- history happened there

DRAMA

DAVID IVES

The Philadelphia

This play is for Greg Pliska, who knows what a Philadelphia can be.

Characters

AL: California cool; 20s or 30s
MARK: frazzled; 20s or 30s
WAITRESS: weary; as you will

Setting

A bar/restaurant. A table, red-checkered cloth, two chairs, and a specials board. At lights up, AL is at the restaurant, with the WAITRESS.

WAITRESS: Can I help you?
AL: Do you know you would look fantastic on a wide screen?
WAITRESS: Uh-huh.
AL: Seventy millimeters.
WAITRESS: Look. Do you want to see a menu, or what?
AL: Let's negotiate, here. What's the soup du jour today?
WAITRESS: Soup of the day you got a choice of Polish duck blood or cream of kidney.
AL: Beautiful. Beautiful! Kick me in a kidney.
WAITRESS: (*Writes it down.*) You got it.
AL: Any oyster crackers on your seabed?
WAITRESS: Nope. All out.
AL: How about the specials today? Spread out your options.
WAITRESS: You got your deep-fried gizzards.
AL: Fabulous.

WAITRESS: Calves' brains with okra.
AL: You are a *temptress.*
WAITRESS: And pickled pigs' feet.
AL: Pigs' feet, *I love it.* Put me down for a quadruped.
WAITRESS: If you say so.
AL: Any sprouts to go on those feet?
WAITRESS: Iceberg.
AL: So be it.
(Waitress exits, as MARK enters, looking shaken and bedraggled.)
MARK: Al!
AL: Hey there, Marcus. What's up?
MARK: Jesus!
AL: What's going on, buddy?
MARK: Oh man...!
AL: What's the matter? Sit down.
MARK: I don't get it, Al. I don't understand it.
AL: You want something? Want a drink? I'll call the waitress—
MARK: (*Desperate.*) *No!* No! Don't even try. (*Gets a breath.*) I don't know what's going on today, Al. It's really weird.
AL: What, like...?
MARK: Right from the time I got up.
AL: What is it? What's the story?
MARK: Well—just for an example. This morning I stopped off at a drugstore to buy some aspirin. This is at a big drugstore, right?
AL: Yeah...
MARK: I go up to the counter, the guy says what can I do for you, I say, Give me a bottle of aspirin. The guy gives me this funny look and he says, "Oh we don't have *that,* sir." I said to him, You're a drugstore and you don't have any aspirin?
AL: Did they have Bufferin?
MARK: Yeah!
AL: Advil?
MARK: Yeah!
AL: Extra-strength Tylenol?
MARK: Yeah!
AL: But no aspirin.
MARK: No!
AL: Wow...
MARK: And that's the kind of weird thing that's been happening all day. It's like, I go to a newsstand to buy the *Daily News,* the guy never even *heard* of it.
AL: Could've been a misunderstanding.
MARK: I asked everyplace—*nobody* had the *News*! I had to read the *Toronto Hairdresser.* Or this. I go into a deli at lunchtime to buy a sandwich, the

guys tells me they don't have any *pastrami*. How can they be a deli if they don't have pastrami?

AL: Was this a Korean deli?

MARK: This was a kosher-from-*Jerusalem* deli. "Oh we don't carry *that*, sir," he says to me. "Have some tongue."

AL: Mmm.

MARK: I just got into a cab, the guy says he doesn't go to Fifty-sixth Street! He offers to take me to Newark instead!

AL: Mm-hm.

MARK: Looking at me like I'm an alien or something!

AL: Mark. Settle down.

MARK: "Oh I don't go *there*, sir."

AL: Settle down. Take a breath.

MARK: Do you know what this is?

AL: Sure.

MARK: What is it? What's happening to me?

AL: Don't panic. You're in a Philadelphia.

MARK: I'm in a what?

AL: You're in a Philadelphia. That's all.

MARK: But I'm in—

AL: Yes, physically you are in New York. But *meta*physically you are in a Philadelphia.

MARK: I've never heard of this!

AL: You see, inside of what we know as reality there are these pockets, these black holes called Philadelphias. If you fall into one, you run up against exactly the kinda shit that's been happening to you all day.

MARK: Why?

AL: Because in a Philadelphia, no matter what you ask for, you can't get it. You ask for something, they're not gonna have it. You want to do something, it ain't gonna get done. You want to go somewhere, you can't get there from here.

MARK: Good God. So this is very serious.

AL: Just remember, Marcus. This is a condition named for the town that invented the *cheese steak*. Something that nobody in his right mind would willingly ask for.

MARK: And I thought I was just having a very bad day...

AL: Sure. Millions of people have spent entire lifetimes inside a Philadelphia and never even knew it. Look at the city of Philadelphia itself. Hopelessly trapped forever inside a Philadelphia. And do they know it?

MARK: Well what can I do? Should I just kill myself now and get it over with?

AL: You try to kill yourself in a Philadelphia, you're only gonna get hurt, babe.

MARK: So what do I do?

AL: Best thing you can do is wait it out. Someday the great cosmic train will whisk you outa the City of Brotherly Love and off to someplace happier.

MARK: *You're* pretty goddamn mellow today.

AL: Yeah well. Everybody has to be someplace.

(*WAITRESS enters.*)

WAITRESS: Is your name Allen Chase?

AL: It is indeed.

WAITRESS: There was a phone call for you. Your boss?

AL: Okay.

WAITRESS: He says you're fired.

AL: Cool! Thanks. (*WAITRESS exits.*) So anyway, you have this problem...

MARK: Did she just say you got *fired?*

AL: Yeah. I wonder what happened to my pigs' feet...

MARK: Al—I? You *loved* your job!

AL: Hey. No sweat.

MARK: How can you be so calm?

AL: Easy. You're in a Philadelphia? *I* woke up in a Los Angeles. And life is beautiful! You know Susie packed up and left me this morning.

MARK: Susie left you?

AL: And frankly, Scarlett, I don't give a shit. I say, go and God bless and may your dating pool be Olympic-sized.

MARK: But your job? The garment district is your life!

AL: So I'll turn it into a movie script and sell it to Paramount. Toss in some sex, add a little emotional blah-blah-*blah*, pitch it to Jack and Dusty, you got a buddy movie with a garment background. Not relevant enough? We'll throw in the hole in the ozone, make it E.C.

MARK: E.C.?

AL: Environmentally correct. Have you heard about this hole in the ozone?

MARK: Sure.

AL: Marcus, I *love* this concept. I *embrace* this ozone. Sure, some people are gonna get hurt in the process, meantime everybody else'll tan a little faster.

MARK: (*Quiet horror.*) So this is a Los Angeles...

AL: Well. Everybody has to be someplace.

MARK: Wow.

AL: You want my advice? *Enjoy your Philadelphia.* Sit back and order yourself a beer and a burger and chill out for a while.

MARK: But I can't order anything. Life is great for you out there on your cosmic beach, but whatever *I* ask for, I'll get a cheese steak or something.

AL: No. There's a very simple rule of thumb in a Philadelphia. *Ask for the opposite.*

MARK: What?

AL: If you can't get what you ask for, ask for the opposite and you'll get what you want. You want the *Daily News*, ask for the *Times*. You want pastrami, ask for tongue.

MARK: Oh.

AL: Works great with women. What is more opposite than the opposite sex?

MARK: Uh-huh.

AL: So. Would you like a Bud?

MARK: I sure could use a—

AL: No. Stop. (*Very deliberately.*) *Do you want...a Bud?*

MARK: (*Also deliberately.*) No. I *don't* want a Bud. (*WAITRESS enters and goes to the specials board.*)

AL: Good. Now there's the waitress. Order yourself a Bud and a burger. But do not *ask* for a Bud and a burger.

MARK: Waitress!

AL: Don't call her. She won't come.

MARK: Oh.

AL: You're in a Philadelphia, so just figure, fuck her.

MARK: Fuck *her.*

AL: You don't need that waitress.

MARK: *Fuck* that waitress.

AL: And everything to do with her.

MARK: *Hey waitress! FUCK YOU!* (*WAITRESS turns to him.*)

WAITRESS: Can I help you, sir?

AL: *That's* how you get service in a Philadelphia.

WAITRESS: Can I help you?

MARK: Uh—no thanks.

WAITRESS: Okay, what'll you have? (*Takes out her pad.*)

AL: Excellent.

MARK: Well—how about some O.J.

WAITRESS: Sorry. Squeezer's broken.

MARK: A glass of milk?

WAITRESS: Cow's dry.

MARK: Egg nog?

WAITRESS: Just ran out.

MARK: Cuppa coffee?

WAITRESS: Oh we don't have *that,* sir. (*MARK and AL exchange a look, and nod. The WAITRESS has spoken the magic words.*)

MARK: Got any ale?

WAITRESS: Nope.

MARK: Stout?

WAITRESS: Nope.

MARK: Porter?

WAITRESS: Just beer.

MARK: That's too bad. How about a Heineken?

WAITRESS: Heineken? Try again.

MARK: Rolling Rock?

WAITRESS: Outta stock.
MARK: Schlitz?
WAITRESS: Nix.
MARK: Beck's?
WAITRESS: Next.
MARK: Sapporo?
WAITRESS: Tomorrow.
MARK: Lone Star?
WAITRESS: Hardy-har.
MARK: Bud Lite?
WAITRESS: Just plain Bud is all we got.
MARK: No thanks.
WAITRESS: (*Calls.*) *Gimme a Bud!* (*To MARK.*) Anything to eat?
MARK: Nope.
WAITRESS: Name it.
MARK: Pork chops.
WAITRESS: (*Writes down.*) Hamburger...
MARK: Medium.
WAITRESS: Well done...
MARK: Baked potato.
WAITRESS: Fries...
MARK: And some zucchini.
WAITRESS: Slice of raw. (*Exits, calling.*) Burn one!
AL: Marcus, that was excellent.
MARK: Thank you.
AL: *Excellent.* You sure you've never done this before?
MARK: I've spent so much of my life asking for the wrong thing without knowing it, doing it on purpose comes easy.
AL: I hear you.
MARK: I could've saved myself a lot of trouble if I'd screwed up on purpose all those years. Maybe I was in a Philadelphia all along and never knew it!
AL: You might've been in a Baltimore. They're practically the same. (*WAITRESS enters, with a glass of beer and a plate.*)
WAITRESS: Okay. Here's your Bud. (*Sets that in front of MARK.*) And one cheese steak. (*She sets that in front of AL, and starts to go.*)
AL: Excuse me. Hey. Wait a minute. What is that?
WAITRESS: It's cheese steak.
AL: No. I ordered cream of kidney and two pairs of feet.
WAITRESS: Oh we don't have *that*, sir.
AL: I beg your pardon?
WAITRESS: We don't have that, sir. (*Small pause.*)
AL: (*To MARK.*) You son of a bitch! *I'm in your Philadelphia!*
MARK: I'm sorry, Al.

AL: You brought me into your fucking Philadelphia!

MARK: I didn't know it was contagious.

AL: Oh God, please don't let me be in a Philadelphia! Don't let me in a—

MARK: Shouldn't you ask for the opposite? I mean, since you're in a Philad—

AL: Don't you tell *me* about life in a Philadelphia.

MARK: Maybe you're not really—

AL: I taught you everything you know about Philly, asshole. Don't tell *me* how to act in a Philadelphia!

MARK: But maybe you're not really in a Philadelphia!

AL: Do you see the cheese on that steak? What do I need for proof? The fucking *Liberty Bell*? Waitress, bring me a glass of water.

WAITRESS: Water? Don't have that, sir.

AL: (*To MARK.*) "We don't have *water*"—? What, you think we're in a sudden drought or something? (*Suddenly realizes.*) Holy shit, I just lost my job...I Susie left me! I gotta make some phone calls! (*To WAITRESS.*) 'Scuse me, where's the pay phone?

WAITRESS: Sorry, we don't have a pay ph—

AL: Of *course* you don't have a pay phone, of *course* you don't! Oh shit, let me outa here! (*Exits.*)

MARK: I don't know. It's not that bad in a Philadelphia.

WAITRESS: Could be worse. I've been in a Cleveland all week.

MARK: A Cleveland. What's that like?

WAITRESS: It's like death, without the advantages.

MARK: Really. Care to stand?

WAITRESS: Don't mind if I do. (*She sits.*)

MARK: I hope you won't reveal your name.

WAITRESS: Sharon.

MARK: (*Holds out his hand.*) Good-bye.

WAITRESS: Hello. (*They shake.*)

MARK: (*Indicating the cheese steak.*) Want to starve?

WAITRESS: Thanks! (*She picks up the cheese steak and starts eating.*)

MARK: Yeah, everybody has to be someplace...(*Leans across the table with a smile.*) So.

BLACKOUT

TRY THIS 5.14

The Greek and Roman method of comedy was to take an absurd idea and follow it very logically, very precisely, and straight-faced to its conclusion. This is the comic form of *The Philadelphia.* If you have a good, really absurd idea, write a ten-minute comedy. (This is a good place to brainstorm *What if...?*)

TRY THIS 5.15

Write a stage direction, using no more than five elements or objects to set the scene onstage. See how much you can tell us with these five things about the place and time and the characters who are likely to enter.

Or:

Set a short scene in a place as banal or characterless as you can think of. Make the dialogue bizarre.

WORKING TOWARD A DRAFT

Take one page from among the things you have written, and add a passage detailing the place, time, and/or weather. Use all active verbs in your description. Use the passage to intensify the mood.

Or:

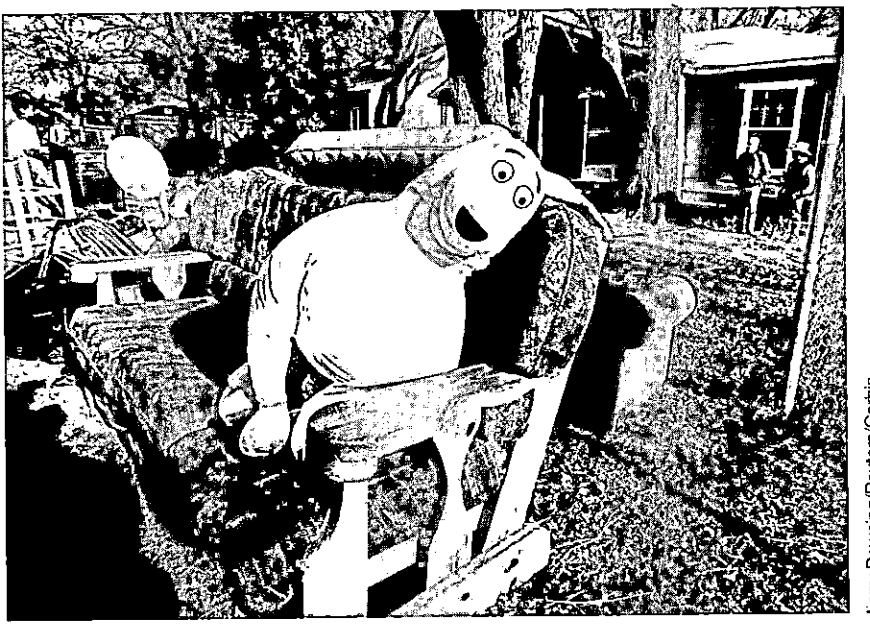
Take something you have written and rewrite it, setting it in some altogether different space. If it took place in private, set it in public; if in the past, set it in the future; if on a playground, set it in a cemetery; and so forth. Does this displacement offer possibilities for enriching the piece?

CHAPTER

Story

- *As a Journey*
- *As a Power Struggle*
- *As Connection and Disconnection*

Act I, get your guy up a tree. Act II, throw rocks at him. Act III, get your guy outta the tree.
Julius Epstein



Larry Downing/Reuters/Corbis

WARM-UP
These are the belongings of a family being evicted. Who are they? How many are they? Give them names. Whose is the stuffed dog? Why are they being turned out? Who do they blame? Where will they go? What awaits them there?

Story as a Journey

The late great novelist and teacher John Gardner used to say that there are only two stories: *someone went on a journey* and *a stranger came to town.*

I once ran into a poet at the Yaddo writers' colony who reduced the formula still further: "You fiction writers," he said. "Everything you write is the same: two worlds collide; a love story."

The novelist Chaim Potok used to say that the only subject he wanted to write about was a clash between cultures, The Insider encountering The Other.

These are all ways of expressing the fundamental form of a story. When worlds (cultures, generations, genders, 'hoods) encounter each other, conflict will inevitably occur (in a thousand different guises). When conflict occurs, human beings will band together in some form of love. Sometimes allies, families, races, gangs, nations, will draw closer together to repel a common antagonist. Sometimes connection will be made across the divide of *self* and *other.*

In Chapter 3, I said that a dynamic character is someone capable of change. The encounter or collision of one character with others will force such change, and the story is the process of that change. The altered state may be from alive to dead, from ugly to beautiful, from ignorant to wise, callous to compassionate, from certain to uncertain or vice versa. But the change occurs because the character confronts a situation that will challenge her/his assumptions and somehow shake up the easy beliefs—hence the prevalence, in such a formulation, of strangers, journeys, and worlds. I like the metaphor of the two worlds, too, because it suggests both the importance of setting and the necessity of discovery and decision. The new world that the character discovers may be the house next door, it may be a different set of assumptions or the next stage of life (puberty is a foreign country, marriage is an undiscovered planet)—but the story will always end in an altered state in at least the character whose point of view we share. Usually the character will have his or her scope enlarged—but not always. Usually the story will result in greater wisdom, compassion, or understanding—though it can end in diminishment or narrowing. As *readers,* however, we will *always,* if the story succeeds, have our capacity for empathy enlarged by having lived in the character's skin for the duration. Every story is in this important human sense a "love story."

A story is a journey is only one of many useful metaphors for the shape of a story, but it is the one almost always used by actors and directors when they set out to produce a play. Where does the protagonist want to go (what does she/he desire)? What are the obstacles encountered (what discoveries are made, what conflicts arise)? What does she/he do to overcome these obstacles (what decisions are made)? Is the goal reached? Is it as expected?

Sometimes the journey of the story ends in fulfillment, sometimes not; sometimes the goal is reached and proves not worth the trip; sometimes a detour leads to paradise.

Here is a **short-short story** (only 101 words) about a long journey. Written in the diction of a five-year-old, it manages to give a panorama in space and time, as well as details that particularize both the setting and the characters. What change takes place in the character? How does the single line of dialogue at the end show this change?

I've never been this far from home. I've never stayed up this late. I'm out west.

We rode the train. I slept upstairs. You put your clothes in a hammock. They have Dixie cups.

The world has mountains on the edge, where the sun sets, big black things, and that's where we're going.

I'm in the front seat with my mother. I'm five. We're going to a dude ranch. There will be cowboys.

There's a soft green glow on the dash board. My mother wears perfume.

I'm traveling. I've never been this old.

"The stars are ablaze," I tell my mother.

"Frontiers," *John M. Daniel*

TRY THIS 6.1

Write a two-page memoir or a short-short story about a journey. Give us the setting and at least two characters. They discover something that causes trouble. Let the main character make a decision and take an action.

Or:

Write about a time that you started out on a trip but failed to arrive at your destination. What was the obstacle—weather, accident, mechanical failure, human failure, human conflict? Characterize both the people involved and the setting through significant detail; give us a sense of the trip itself. What changed from the beginning expectations? How did you change?

Story as a Power Struggle

Another, perhaps the most common, way of looking at story structure is in terms of **conflict, crisis,** and **resolution,** a shape that comes from Aristotle's insistence on *a beginning, a middle,* and *an end.*

This model acknowledges that, in literature, only trouble is interesting. *Only* trouble is interesting. This is not so in life. Life offers periods of comfortable communication, peaceful pleasure, and productive work, all of

which are extremely interesting to those involved. But passages about such times make for dull reading; they cannot be used as a plot.

Suppose, for example, you go on a picnic. You find a beautiful deserted meadow with a lake nearby. The weather is splendid and so is the company. The food's delicious, the water's fine, and the insects have taken the day off. Afterward, someone asks you how your picnic was. "Terrific," you reply, "really perfect." No story.

But suppose the next week you go back for a rerun. You set your picnic blanket on an anthill. You all race for the lake to get cold water on the bites, and one of your friends goes too far out on the plastic raft, which deflates. He can't swim and you have to save him. On the way in you gash your foot on a broken bottle. When you get back to the picnic, the ants have taken over the cake and a possum has demolished the chicken. Just then the sky opens up. When you gather your things to race for the car, you notice a bull has broken through the fence. The others run for it, but because of your bleeding heel the best you can do is hobble. You have two choices: try to outrun him or stand perfectly still and hope he's interested only in a moving target. At this point, you don't know if your friends can be counted on for help, even the nerd whose life you saved. You don't know if it's true that a bull is attracted by the smell of blood.

A year later, assuming you're around to tell about it, you are still saying, "Let me *tell* you what happened last year." And your listeners are saying, "What a story!"

This pattern of trouble and the effort to overcome it is repeated in every story on a larger or smaller scale. It may seem, for example, that the five-year-old in the previous short-short is not in much trouble. But look at the huge dangers he faces: *never been this far from home, never up this late; mountains on the edge, big black things where we're going.* The clear and intense desire to get to the dude ranch is countered by the awesome strangeness of the adventure. Two worlds collide, in fact.

In the conflict-crisis-resolution model, story is seen as a power struggle between two nearly equal forces, a **protagonist** or central character and an **antagonist,** who represents the obstacles to the protagonist's desires and may be another human being or some other force—God, nature, the self, and so forth. If the antagonist is some abstract force, then, like the character's desire, it will also have a very specific manifestation: not "nature" but "seven miles of white water rapids on the lower Colorado"; not "the supernatural" but "a mutant reptile embryo capable of hatching in a human middle ear."

It is crucial that the opposing forces have approximately equal force, so that our uncertainty about the outcome keeps us reading. We begin with a situation in which the power is with the protagonist or the antagonist. Something happens, and the power shifts to the other. Something else, and it shifts back again. Each time the power shifts, the stakes are raised, each

battle is bigger, more intense than the last, until (at the crisis moment) one of the two opposing forces manifests its power in a way that the other cannot match.

Here is another short-short story (a lavish 232 words this time), also in a child's voice, in which the conflict-crisis-resolution pattern is intense.

> *Watching Joey pop the red berries into his mouth like Ju-Ju Bees and Mags only licking them at first, then chewing, so both of their smiles look bloody and I laugh though I don't eat even one...then suddenly our moms are all around us (although mine doesn't panic till she looks at the others, then screams along with them things like God dammit did you eat these? and shakes me so my "No" sounds like "oh-oh-oh") and then we're being yanked toward the house, me for once not resisting as my mother scoops me into her arms, and inside the moms shove medicine, thick and purple, down our throats in the bathroom; Joey in the toilet, Mags in the sink, me staring at the hair in the tub drain as my mom pushes my head down, and there is red vomit everywhere, splashing on the mirror and powder-blue rugs, everywhere except the tub where mine is coming out yellow, the color of corn muffins from lunch, not a speck of red,* I told you, *I want to scream, and then it is over and I turn to my mother for a touch or a stroke on the head like the other moms (but she has moved to the doorway and lights a cigarette, pushes hair out of her eyes) and there is only her smeared lips saying,* This will teach you anyway.
>
> "This Is How I Remember It," *Elizabeth Kemper French*

In this classical pattern, the story begins with an **exposition,** or statement of the situation at the beginning of the action, which is typically, as here, a state of unstable equilibrium (*I laugh, though I don't eat even one ...*). **Conflict** arrives with the mothers, and that conflict undergoes a series of **complications** involving force, blame, mistake, submission, anger, and so forth. The power struggle between mother and daughter escalates through a change of setting. Details build the contrast between the kinds of *mom* and the kinds of vomit. The **crisis action** occurs as a moment of martyred triumph for the narrator (*I told you*) and then there is a **falling action** or **denouement** in which the mother and daughter retreat to their respective corners and settle back into what (we know by now) is their habit of being. This is the **resolution.** Some questions to consider: Why did the author choose to tell this story in a single sentence? What does the narrator want? Who wins? Is it worth it?

This very short story is very much of the modern period, in that the crisis occurs in the mind of the narrator and the "resolution" does not offer a "solution." The completion of the action has changed the characters not by a dramatic reversal, but by moving them deeper into their *impasse.*

Order is a major value that literature offers us, and order implies that the subject has been brought to closure. In life this never quite happens. Even the natural "happy endings," marriage and birth, leave domesticity and child-rearing to be dealt with; the natural "tragic endings," separation and death, leave trauma and bereavement in their wake. Literature absolves us of these nuisances. Whether or not the lives of the characters end, the story does, and we are left with a satisfying sense of completion. This is one reason we enjoy crying or feeling terrified or even nauseated by fiction; we know in advance that it's going to be over, and by contrast with the continual struggle of living, all that ends, ends well.

TRY THIS 6.2

Write a short story on a postcard. (Write small.) Make sure it has a conflict, a crisis, and a resolution. Send it to a friend in another place (meaning you have published it), or to yourself (when it arrives you will be able to see it fresh).

Or:

A story, a memoir, or a play: Place two characters in a dangerous setting. Each has half of something that is no good without the other half. Neither wants to give up his/her half. What happens?

Story as Connection and Disconnection

> Connection is human substance, the substance of story. Its gain and loss provides the emotional power.
>
> *Claudia Johnson*

Every story presents some sort of journey, literal or psychological or both, that results in a change in the central character. Every story shows a pattern of conflict between approximately equal forces, which leads to a crisis and a resolution. Every story also offers a pattern of connection and disconnection between human beings, which is the source of meaning and significance in the story. Conflict is exciting; it keeps the reader wondering what will happen next. But conflict itself is sterile unless it is given human dimension through the connections and disconnections of the characters.

Therefore, boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl (connection, disconnection, connection). Therefore, Hamlet's father dies (disconnects), but comes back (connects) as a ghost, Hamlet rages against his mother (disconnects), welcomes his school friends (connects), breaks off with Ophelia (disconnects), kills her father (disconnects), betrays his school friends (disconnects), kills his stepfather (disconnects) and, in the arms (connects) of his best friend, dies (disconnects). It will be evident that a story that ends

in disconnection, especially death, tends toward tragedy, and one that ends in connection, traditionally marriage, is a comedy. Examine any story that makes you care, and you will see that people *who matter to each other* perform, as in life, patterns of love and hate, alienation and community, anger and forgiveness, connection and disconnection. As Claudia Johnson puts it, "The conflict and surface events are like waves, but underneath is an emotional tide—the ebb and flow of human connection."

Even in the very short compass of the two short-short stories earlier in the chapter, these patterns occur. In "Frontiers," the boy is frighteningly separated from home, but his mother is there with him, to take him to the glamorous and grown-up connection with *cowboys*. In "This Is How I Remember It," the girl is connected to her friends, but not so close that she will dare the bloodred berries; the moms arrive to connect, each with her own child; but the heroine deeply disconnects from her punitive and unjust mother.

TRY THIS 6.3

Write down a memory of a time you seriously disconnected from someone close to you. Know that the person will never read it.

Or:

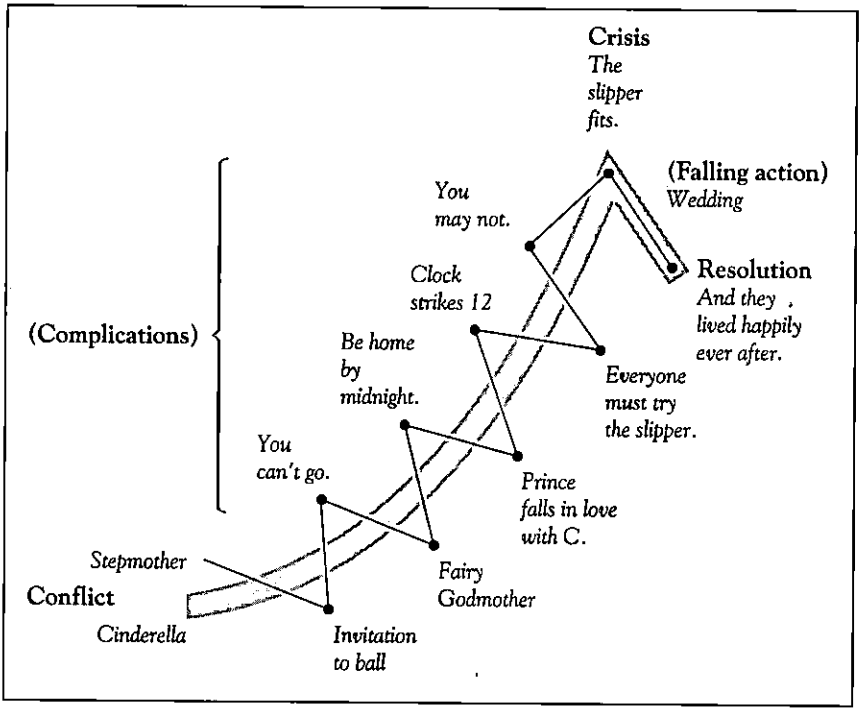
Write a poem about a death, a breakup, a divorce, a quarrel, or leaving a house. Find some small positive aspect of the disconnection.

It is useful to think of story shape as an inverted check mark, rising from left to right and ending in a short downswing. The story begins with an *exposition* of the opening situation, develops a conflict through a series of complications in which the power changes back and forth, and culminates in a crisis. Then there is a brief walking-away (falling action or denouement), leading to resolution.

If we take the familiar tale of Cinderella, we can see how even this simple children's story relates to each of the models—as journey, as power struggle, and as pattern of connection/disconnection.

At the opening of the tale we're given the basic conflict: Cinderella's mother has died, and her father has married a brutal woman with two waspish daughters. Cinderella is made to do all the menial work, and she weeps among the cinders. Her journey is, on the literal level, from the hearth to the palace, and on the mythic level from slave to Princess. Along the way she encounters the obstacles of powerlessness, evil, short-lived magic, and chance. With the aid of goodness, beauty, magic, and chance, she also reaches her goal.

Next consider the story in relation to the "check mark" in terms of a power struggle. The Stepmother has on her side the strength of ugliness and



evil (two very powerful qualities in literature as in life). With her daughters she also has the strength of numbers, and she has parental authority. Cinderella has only beauty and goodness, but (in literature and life) these are also very powerful.

At the beginning, the power is on the Stepmother's side. But the first event of the story is that an invitation arrives from the Prince explicitly stating that *all* the ladies of the land are invited to a ball. Notice that Cinderella's desire is not to triumph over her Stepmother (though she eventually will, much to our satisfaction); such a desire would diminish her goodness. She simply wants equality, so that the Prince's invitation, which specifically gives her a right equal to the Stepmother's and Stepsisters', shifts the power to her.

The Stepmother takes the power back by force: You may not go; you must get us ready to go. Cinderella does so, and the three leave for the ball.

Then what happens? The Fairy Godmother appears. It is very powerful to have magic on your side. The Fairy Godmother offers Cinderella a gown, glass slippers, and a coach with horses and footmen, giving her more force than she has yet had.

But the magic is not all-potent. It will last only until midnight, and Cinderella must leave the ball before then or risk exposure and defeat.

What happens next? She goes to the ball and the Prince falls in love with her—and love is an even more powerful weapon than magic in a literary war. In some versions of the tale, the Stepmother and Stepsisters are made to marvel at the beauty of the princess they don't recognize, pointing to the irony of Cinderella's new power.

And then? The magic quits. The clock strikes twelve, and Cinderella runs down the steps in her rags to her rats and pumpkin, losing a slipper, bereft of her power in every way.

But after that, the Prince sends out a messenger with the glass slipper and a dictum (a dramatic repetition of the original invitation in which all ladies were invited to the ball) that every female in the land is to try on the slipper. Cinderella is given her rights again by royal decree.

What happens then? In most retellings, the Stepmother repeats her assumption of brute authority by hiding Cinderella away, while our expectations are tantalizingly delayed with grotesque comedy: One sister cuts off a toe, the other a heel, trying to fit into the heroine's rightful slipper.

Cinderella tries on the slipper and it fits. *This is the crisis action.* Magic, love, and royalty join to recognize the heroine's true self; evil, numbers, and authority are powerless against them. At this point, the power struggle has been decided. When the slipper fits, no further action can deprive Cinderella of her desire. The change in the lives of all concerned is significant and permanent. The tale then has a brief falling action: The Prince sweeps Cinderella up on his white horse and gallops away to their wedding, and comes to closure with the classic resolution of all comedy: They lived happily ever after.

In many of the finest modern short stories and novels, the true territory of struggle is the main character's mind, and so the real crisis action must occur there. Yet it is important to grasp that any mental reversal that takes place in the crisis of a story must be triggered or shown by an action. The slipper must fit. It would not do if the Stepmother just happened to change her mind and give up the struggle; it would not do if the Prince just happened to notice that Cinderella looked like his love. The moment of recognition *must be manifested in an action.*

The *crisis,* also referred to as the *turning point* or *climax* of a story, is often the most difficult for beginning writers to identify and to produce. It is likely to be the moment of greatest emotional intensity in the story, and it is by definition the point at which the change in the protagonist is decisive and inevitable.

In "Red Sky in the Morning," a memoir that tells a story in the Readings section of this chapter, the crisis moment occurs quite early, as an "indelible bittersweetness," on which the rest of the essay reflects. In the story "Incarnations of Burned Children," also in this chapter, the action begins at high pitch, in the middle of what we would surely call a crisis in life, but

the crisis of the story occurs with the discovery "and they saw where the real water'd fallen," at which point the end is inevitable.

If we look at "Cinderella" in terms of connection/disconnection we see a pattern as clear as that represented by the power struggle. The first painful disconnection is that Cinderella's mother has died; her father has married (connected with) a woman who spurns (disconnects from) her; the Prince's invitation offers connection, the Stepmother's cruelty alienates again: The Fairy Godmother connects as a magical friend, but the disappearance of the coach and gown disconnect Cinderella temporarily from that grand and glorious fairy tale union, marriage to the Prince. If we consult the emotions that this tale engenders—pity, anger, hope, fear, romance, anticipation, disappointment, triumph—we see that both the struggle between antagonist/protagonist and the pattern of alienation/connectedness are necessary to ensure, not only that there is an action, but also that we care about its outcome.

Forms of imaginative writing are not mutually exclusive. Often a memoir is dramatic, dialogue can be lyrical, narrative turns to poetry. Above all, many essays, poems, and plays have the fundamental form of story. This form—in its incarnations as journey, conflict-crisis-resolution, and connection/disconnection—is so prevalent in human culture that scarcely any communication is free of it. The most casual conversation includes anecdotes of destination and detour. The company report boasts of obstacles overcome. The trip to school shapes up as power struggle between protagonist child and antagonist mom, resolved with a connecting hug or a parting blast. Awareness of these shapes can inform any genre of writing and help to bridge the gap between mind and mind, helping to achieve the first desire of any writer: connection with that intimate stranger, the reader.

TRY THIS 6.4

Write a memory that tells a story.

Or:

Write a poem that is a journey.

Or:

Write a dialogue that contains a power struggle.

More to Read

Burroway, Janet. *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft.* New York: Longman, 2011. Print.

Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972. Print.

READINGS

CREATIVE NONFICTION

PATRICIA HAMPL

Red Sky in the Morning

Years ago, in another life, I woke to look out the smeared window of a Greyhound bus I had been riding all night, and in the still-dark morning of a small Missouri river town where the driver had made a scheduled stop at a grimy diner, I saw below me a stout middle-aged woman in a flowered housedress turn and kiss full on the mouth a godlike young man with golden curls. But I've got that wrong: *he* was kissing *her*. Passionately, without regard for the world and its incomprehension. He had abandoned himself to his love, and she, stolid, matronly, received this adoration with simple grandeur, like a socialist-realist statue of a woman taking up sheaves of wheat.

Their ages dictated that he must be her son, but I had just come out of the cramped, ruinous half sleep of a night on a Greyhound and I was clairvoyant: This was that thing called love. The morning light cracked blood red along the river.

Of course, when she lumbered onto the bus a moment later, lurching forward with her two bulging bags, she chose the empty aisle seat next to me as her own. She pitched one bag onto the overhead rack, and then heaved herself into the seat as if she were used to hoisting sacks of potatoes onto the flatbed of a pickup. She held the other bag on her lap, and leaned toward the window. The beautiful boy was blowing kisses. He couldn't see where she was in the dark interior, so he blew kisses up and down the side of the bus, gazing ardently at the blank windows. "Pardon me," the woman said without looking at me, and leaned over, bag and all, to rap the glass. Her beautiful boy ran back to our window and kissed and kissed, and finally hugged himself, shutting his eyes in an ecstatic pantomime of love-sweet-love. She smiled and waved back.

Then the bus was moving. She slumped back in her seat, and I turned to her. I suppose I looked transfixed. As our eyes met she said, "Everybody thinks he's my son. But he's not. He's my husband." She let that sink in. She was a farm woman with hands that could have been a man's; I was a university student, hair down to my waist. It was long ago, as I said, in another life. It was even another life for the country. The Vietnam War was the time we were living through, and I was traveling, as I did every three weeks, to visit my boyfriend who was in a federal prison. "Draft dodger," my brother said. "Draft resister," I piously retorted. I had never been kissed the way this woman had been kissed. I was living in a tattered corner of a romantic idyll,

An Example of Line Editing

At the Dolphin Inn on ~~the~~ Sandbar Key, Dale and I are hosting a birthday party for his daughter Sam and her two friends Dolly and Grappa. (I give all of us pseudonyms for reasons that will ~~become clear~~ evident.) It's clear that these three eleven-year-olds are teetering on the edge of puberty. Now they are gigling and whispering over the angelfood skirt of the birthday-cake doll, now checking out the cleavage in Self Magazine, now haggling over whether to watch Scooby Doo, now thrusting butt and belly into the line of vision of the red-headed boy in the Dolphin Inn pool. We have got a "suite," which means a bedroom and living room with a pull-out couch. The theory being that the bed room is for Dale and me. Three eleven-year-olds cannot remove so much as a sandy sock in the presence of an adult male, so most of the time our bedroom is either locked against us or ~~stroun~~ strewn with wadded up under wear, wet bathing suits, and desiccated angel food. Every swim requires a shower before and a bath after. Three girls showering, swimming, bathing four times a day—you do the math while I sopp up the bathroom floor and hang a dozen towels over the deck railing.

TRY THIS B.1

Everyone bring in one or two typed pages of the worst piece you have written. Pass them to the right, or shuffle the pages and pass them out. Line edit the piece you now have, correcting for typos, spelling, punctuation, grammar, and (careful now) style. Take some time to go over the page with the author. Are you in agreement? Have you as editor improved the professionalism of the piece?

glossary

Note: Technical terms concerning **prosody** (the study of meter and sound in poetry) are also found in Appendix A on page 373.

A

Accent, or **stress** Vocal emphasis given to a particular syllable, word, or phrase. The AC-cent or STRESS can be HEARD in the VOICE. See pp. 373 and 374.

Accentual verse Poetry in which only the accented syllables in each line are counted; there may be any number of unaccented syllables. See p. 375.

Alliteration Repeated consonants, particularly at the beginning of words or stressed syllables, as in "With a sound like seed spilled ..." See pp. 299 and 378.

Anapest(n.), **anapestic** (adj.) A poetic foot consisting of two unaccented (unstressed) and one accented (stressed) syllables, as in: in the SKY. See **Poetic foot** and p. 376.

Anaphora The purposeful repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of a series of clauses, sentences, paragraphs, or verses.

Antagonist In narrative, the character who provides the major impediment or obstacle to the main character's desire. See **Protagonist**.

Aside A theatrical convention whereby a character says something that the audience hears but the other characters do not. See p. 339.

Assonance Repeated vowel sounds, as in "The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain." See pp. 303 and 378.

Atmosphere The tone and attitude, as well as the setting, period, weather, and time of day, of a story. The background to the characters' foreground. See p. 144.

Authorial interpretation; authorial intrusion The author speaks directly to the reader, rather than through the point of view of the character. By and large, the device is interpretive any time the author tells us what we should think or feel; it is intrusive if we mind this. See pp. 106 and 233.

B

Backstory Past events that are necessary to understand a narrative or its significance. See p. 266.

Ballad meter A stanza of four lines, usually of iambic tetrameter, usually rhymed ABCD. See p. 380.

Beat In drama, the smallest unit of dramatic action, usually signaled by a discovery, a decision, or a change of strategy. The term can be confusing because it also is used in a play script to indicate a brief pause (as in, for instance, Lanford Wilson's *Eukiah* on p. 190).

Blank verse Unrhymed iambic pentameter. The most common line in English poetry. See p. 379.

Brainstorm A problem-solving technique that can also generate ideas for an imagined situation. The writer free-associates a list of ideas, connections, solutions, then uses these as prompts for writing. Often takes the form *What if ...?* See p. 7.

C

Cacophony Jarring, discordant sound. See p. 378.

Caesura A pause within a line of poetry, often indicated by a comma or period. See p. 374.

Central Narrator See **Narrator.**

Character A fictional person. The basis of literary writing. See Chapter 4.

Characterization May be direct, through describing how the character looks, acts, etc., or indirect, through summary or interpretation. See Chapter 4.

Cliché A word, phrase, or metaphor that represents the predictable or overly familiar, and usually indicates lazy writing. See pp. 27 and 308.

Climax See **Crisis.**

Complications Aspects of the conflict that build the plot toward its climax. The "*nouement*" or "knotting up" of the action. See p. 170.

Conceit A metaphor in which the connection between the two things compared is not immediately clear. In Samuel Johnson's words, "yoked by violence together," as in John Donne's comparison of a flea to the holy trinity, or Nathanael West's "love is like a vending machine." The author must explain the similarity. See p. 309.

Concrete, significant details Specifics that address the senses in meaningful ways. The basic building blocks of imaginative writing, and what is meant by the advice *Show, don't tell.*

- *Concrete* means that there is an image, something that can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched.
- *Detail* means that there is a degree of focus and specificity.
- *Significant* means that the specific image also suggests an abstraction, generalization, or judgment.

See p. 20.

Connotation The complex of meanings and ideas that come to be associated with a word, as "rose" suggests not only the flower but beauty, fragrance, womanhood, perhaps ephemerality, and/or the hidden threat of thorns. See p. 307.

Conflict The struggle between protagonist and antagonist, or between two opposing forces. Considered necessary to narrative, because it generates a desire in the reader to find out what is going to happen. See p. 170.

Consonant The sound produced by any obstruction of the air stream, brought about by a constriction of one or more of the organs of voice. In English, all the letters of the alphabet that are not vowels (a, e, i, o, u, sometimes y) are consonants. See p. 373.

Consonant cluster A poetic effect created by "back to back" consonants, so that the speaker has to stop between words in order the pronounce them, as in "The self forgets such strength." See p. 378.

Couplet Two lines of verse, usually rhymed, which can constitute an entire poem or stand as part of a longer stanzaic form. An example:

"Wales, which I have never seen,

Is gloomy, mountainous, and green ..."

See p. 379.

Creative nonfiction The essay, enlivened through attention to stylistic and dramatic devices, personal voice, and a search for range and resonance. Also called **literary nonfiction**. See Chapter 8.

Crisis The point of highest tension in a story, at which a discovery or a decision is made that decides the outcome of the conflict. See pp. 168 and 170.

D

Dactyl (n.), **dactylic** (adj.) A poetic foot consisting of one accented (stressed) and two unaccented (unstressed) syllables, as in: FOR-ti-fy. See **Poetic foot** and p. 376.

Dead metaphor A metaphor so common that it has lost the original sense of comparison and acquired a further definition, as "sifting the evidence" no longer calls a sieve to mind. See p. 309.

Denotation The most direct or specific meaning of a word; how it is defined. See p. 307.

Denouement The resolution at the end of a story. The return to order after the conflict, its complications, and climax have passed. See p. 170.

Density In literature, the arrangement of words and images to pack maximum meaning into minimum space. See p. 310.

Dialogue The characters' talk. Dialogue may be:

- **Direct**, the spoken words quoted: "No, I can't stand the little monsters and I won't herd a bunch of them to the damn park unless I'm paid."
- **Indirect**, the words related in third person: She said she couldn't stand kids and wouldn't take them to the park unless she got paid.

- **Summarized**, reported at a distance: She claimed to hate children, and irritatedly demanded payment for taking them to the park.

See pp. 101.

Diction A combination of *vocabulary*, the words chosen, and *syntax*, the order in which they are used. Diction will convey not only the facts but also the tone and attitude of the person whose voice speaks to us from the page. See p. 99.

Diegetic Musical or other effects that occur naturally as part of the dramatic narrative (a character turns on the radio and a song comes out). **Nondiegetic** effects occur when there is no such natural or realistic link (a suspenseful scene is accompanied by music to enhance the tension). See p. 335.

Dimeter A line consisting of two poetic feet. See **Poetic foot** and p. 377.

Direct dialogue See **Dialogue.**

Distance The position, close or far, of the author in relation to the characters or narrator, often implying the degree to which we are intended to identify with or trust them. Distance will be affected first of all by diction and tone, and may involve a literal distance in time or space (the narrator, for example, is telling a story about himself as a child) or a psychic distance (the author is describing the exploits of a psychopath). See p. 60.

Dramatic irony The audience (or reader) knows something that the character doesn't know. See p. 336.

E

End rhyme The rhyming words or syllables occur at the end of the poetic line, as in:

"Ever let the fancy roam,
Pleasure never is at home."

See p. 378.

End-stopped The phrase, clause, or sentence punctuation occurs at the end of poetic line, as in the example just above. See p. 306.

Enjambment The opposite of end-stopped; the sentence and its meaning carry on from one line (or stanza) to the next:

"Notwithstanding you are in your grave
These fifteen months, you are invited to apply
For a fixed-rate zero-percent American
Express ..."

See p. 306.

Epistolary May describe an essay, poem, novel, or story consisting entirely or mainly of letters written to another character, a person, or an institution.

Epithalamium (or **Epithalamion**) A lyric ode to celebrate a bride and groom.

Essay From the French word meaning "a try," a prose piece with a basis in fact, on a single subject, presenting the view of the author. Kinds of essay include the expository, narrative, descriptive, persuasive, article, feature, profile, literary nonfiction, and creative nonfiction. See Chapter 8, p. 226.

Euphony Pleasant and smooth-flowing sound, the opposite of cacaphony. See p. 378.

Exposition In narrative and especially theater, the laying out of the situation at the opening of the action. See pp. 170 and 330.

F

Falling action The portion of a plot that follows the climax and leads to the resolution. A "walking away from the fight." Also called **denouement**. See p. 170.

Figure of speech (or **trope**, or **figurative speech**) A nonliteral use of language, such as metaphor, simile, hyperbole, personification, and so forth, to enhance or intensify meaning. See pp. 24 and 307.

First person See **Person**.

Flashback In narrative, film, or drama, a leap into the past. The earlier scene is inserted into the normal chronological order. See p. 266.

Foot See **Poetic foot**.

Formal verse Verse written in a predetermined pattern of rhythm and rhyme. See Appendix A, "A Basic Prosody," p. 375.

Fourth-wall realism A theatrical convention in which the stage represents a room with the fourth wall removed. Both actors and audience pretend that what is happening onstage is "really" happening at the present time. See p. 331.

Free verse or **informal verse**. Verse that lacks a regular meter or rhyme scheme, and uses irregular line lengths according to the demands of the particular poem. See p. 302.

Freewrite A piece of writing undertaken without any plan or forethought whatever; writing whatever comes into your head at the moment. Gertrude Stein called this "automatic writing." A **focused freewrite** is a piece written with the same unplanned freedom, but on a chosen topic. See p. 7.

G

Genre A form of writing, such as poetry, drama, or fiction. The term is problematic because "genre fiction" and "genre writing" are terms used differently, to indicate writing in narrow, plot-driven conventions such as the western, romance, detective story, and so forth.

H

Haiku A form of poetry taken from the Japanese, representing a moment of perception, in three lines with a pattern of five, seven, and five syllables, for a total of seventeen syllables. See p. 381.

Heptameter A poetic line of seven feet. See **Poetic foot** and p. 377.

Heroic couplet Two lines of poetry consecutively rhymed, as in:

"Suspicious, dour, morosed, perplexed,

And just a little oversexed."

See p. 379.

Hexameter A poetic line of six feet. See **Poetic foot** and p. 377.

Hyperbole Extreme exaggeration, as in: "You are the sun, the moon, and the stars." See **Figure of speech.**

I

Iamb A poetic foot consisting of one unaccented (unstressed) and one accented (stressed) syllable: hoo-RAY. See **Poetic foot** and p. 375.

Idiom An expression that is grammatically peculiar to itself and can't be understood by understanding its separate elements. English abounds in idioms: *put 'er there, keeps tabs on, of his own accord,* and so forth. The line between idioms, clichés, dead metaphors, and figures of speech is often not distinct. See p. 309.

Inciting incident The event that has created the situation in which the protagonist finds him/herself at the beginning of a drama. For example, Hamlet's father has died and his mother has remarried. See p. 330.

Indirect dialogue See **Dialogue.**

Informal verse See **Free verse.**

Intensity In literature, the raising of tension or emotion through character conflict, language, rhythm, situation, irony, or other artistic device.

Internal rhyme A rhyme in which at least one of the rhyming words occurs within, rather than at the end of, a line, as:

Subdued, the mournful measures falling *under*

The *thunder* of this cascade...

See pp. 304 and 378.

Irony Always involves a contradiction or a denial of expectation in some area. *Verbal irony* occurs where one thing is said and another or its opposite is meant, as in *Brutus is an honorable man. So are they all, all honorable men.* In *dramatic irony,* the audience knows something that the character does not, and so puts a different interpretation on events. Example: Oedipus thinks it great good news that King Polybus has died of old age, for this seems to disprove the oracle that he would kill his father. The audience knows that Polybus was not really his father. So-called

cosmic irony is a contradiction inherent in human action or the human condition: *Using DDT to poison the insects and so grow healtheir crops, farmers poison the water in the aquifer from which people drink.*

L

Long vowel See **Vowels.**

Line A series of words after which there is a typographical break. In prose, the line ends because the type has arrived at a margin, and may vary from one edition or font to another. In poetry, the end of the line implies a slight pause and is used in conjunction with or opposition to the sentence as a means of creating significance. Consequently the line is considered an integral feature of the poem, and will remain the same in each reprinting. See pp. 305 and 373.

Line editing Careful, often final, revision of a manuscript at the level of checking punctuation, spelling, and grammar as well as the nuance of final word choice. See p. 207.

Literary nonfiction See **Creative nonfiction.**

Lyric A type of poem expressing subjective thoughts or feelings, often in the form of a song. See p. 380.

M

Memoir A story retrieved from the writer's memory, with the writer as protagonist. See p. 227.

Metaphor The comparison of one term with another such that a tension is created between what is alike and what is unlike between the two terms.

- A *metaphor* assumes or states the comparison, without acknowledging that it is a comparison: *My electric muscles shock the crowd; Her hair is seaweed and she is the sea.* The metaphor may come in the form of an adjective: *They have a piggy and a fishy air.* Or it may come as a verb: *The bees shouldering the grass.*
- A *simile* is a type of metaphor that acknowledges the comparison by using the words *like* or as: *His teeth rattled like dice in a box; My head is light as a balloon; I will fall like an ocean on that court.*

See p. 24.

Meter From the Greek "measure," a relatively objective or mechanical way of measuring time in poetry, according to the number of feet and syllables in a line. See p. 374.

Metered verse Verse that can be so measured. See p. 374.

Metonymy A figure of speech in which one word or phrase is used as substitute for another with which it is associated, as in *the pen is mightier than the sword,* or when *inside the beltway* is used to mean *the U.S. government in Washington.* See p. 24.

Mnemonic Helpful to or intended to help memory. See p. 296.

Monologue A speech of some length by a single character. See p. 52.

Monometer A line consisting of a single poetic foot. See **Poetic foot** and p. 368.

Mood See **Atmosphere.**

N

Narrative A story; the telling of a story.

Narrator The one who tells the story. We often speak of the author as narrator if the piece is told in the third person, although literally a story "has a narrator" only when it is told by a character. This character may be:

- The **central narrator**, the *I* writing *my* story as if it were memoir, or
- The **peripheral narrator**, someone on the edge of the action who is nevertheless our eyes and ears in the story and therefore the person with whom we identify, and with whom we must be moved or changed.

See p. 56.

Nondiegetic In drama, the specific goal that a character has in any given beat of dialogue. What the character wants at this moment of the action. See **Diegetic.**

O

Objective In drama, the specific goal that a character has in any given beat of dialogue; what the character wants at this moment of the action.

Octave In poetry, a group of eight lines, especially the first eight lines of a Petrarchan sonnet. See p. 380.

Ode A lyric poem of some length, usually meditative or serious, with a formal structure and elevated diction.

Off rhyme, or **slant rhyme** An imperfect or partial rhyme, usually a consonance, as *stoned* is an off rhyme for *hand* and *blind*. See p. 378.

Omniscience The narrative convention by which the author knows everything—past, future, any character's thoughts, the significance of events, universal truths. It is the godlike authorial stance. See p. 58.

Onomatopoeia The use of words that sound like what they mean: *buzz, whine, murmur*. See p. 301.

Oral history An essay developed from an interview of a subject by the author, arranged and presented entirely in the words of the subject.

Outline A preliminary plan for a piece of writing, summarizing in list form its major parts or points. See p. 199.

Oxymoron A figure of speech that combines or juxtaposes two contradictory words: *burning ice, shouting whisper, plain decoration*. The term comes from the Greek meaning "sharply foolish," which is itself an oxymoron and expresses the potential of the figure to reveal although it appears not to make sense. See p. 24.

P

Paradox A seemingly contradictory statement of which both parts may nevertheless be true, as in, "A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than for other people." (Thomas Mann) See p. 307.

Pentameter A line of five poetic feet. See **Poetic foot** and p. 377.

Peripheral narrator See **Narrator.**

Person In grammar and narrative, any of three groups of pronouns identifying the subject. **First person:** *I look out the window.* **Second person:** *You look out the window.* **Third person:** *He looks out the window.* See p. 55.

Persona A mask adopted by the author that may be a public manifestation of the author's self; or a distorted or partial version of that self; or a fictional, historical, or mythological character. See p. 50.

Personal essay An essay in which the author is overtly present, either in the events described or because of his/her "take" on the subject through reflection, research, or opinion.

Personification The technique of giving human attributes or emotions to animals, objects, or concepts, as in "the water lapped eagerly at the shore." See p. 22.

Phoneme The smallest sound or phonetic unit that may convey a distinction of meaning, as cat *is distinguished from* hat. See p. 373.

Plot A series of events arranged so as to reveal their significance. See **Story.**

Poetic foot A unit of measurement with one accented or stressed syllable, and one or two unstressed syllables. See pp. 373 and 375.

Poetic line A unit of verse recognizable by the typographic break at the end of it, but also by general consent the basic unit of poetry. The break represents a slight pause or very brief silence. In formal poetry, it may also provide a rhyme and/or signal that a certain number of feet has been reached; in free verse, these formal elements may be absent, but the line break may still convey emphasis, suggest connotation, or imply double or even contradictory meaning. See p. 305.

Point of attack In drama, the first event that sets the plot in motion: for example, the ghost speaks to Hamlet, demanding revenge against Claudius. See p. 330.

Point of view A complex technique of narrative involving who tells the story, to whom, in what form. Importantly, the **person** in which the story is told, and the vantage point from which the story is told, contribute to the ultimate meaning of events. See p. 55.

Prose poem A poem that is not written in lines but continues to the margins of the page like prose. See p. 187.

Prosody The study of meter and sound in poetry. See Appendix A on p. 373.

Protagonist The main character of a narrative; usually one with whom we identify. See p. 169.

Pun A figure of speech that plays on different meanings of the same word, or the different sense or sound of two similar words. "Hair today and gone tomorrow." See p. 24.

Pyrrhic A substitute poetic foot with two unaccented (unstressed) syllables. See p. 376.

Q

Quatrain A verse of four lines. See p. 380.

Quilting A (metaphor for a) method of drafting, especially a prose piece, by gathering paragraphs and physically moving them around to produce a rough structure. See p. 200.

Quintet A verse of five lines. See p. 380.

R

Realism A narrative or dramatic convention that aims at accuracy and verisimilitude in the presentation of period, place, speech, and behavior.

Replacement poem An exercise for reproducing the vigor of an admired poem: Replace all of the verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs with other words representing the same part of speech. See p. 318.

Resolution The end of conflict, usually involving the restoration of order, at the end of a plot. See pp. 168 and 170.

Rhyme A similarity or correspondence of sounds. In a true rhyme, the vowel sound of the accented syllable and everything thereafter correspond, as in *laugh* and *staff*, or *laughter* and *after*. In a rich rhyme, the consonant preceding the vowel also corresponds, (the *p* in) *pair* and *repair* and *despair*. In assonance, only the vowel sound corresponds: *why I might*; in consonance, only the final consonant corresponds: *greet the white cat*. See p. 377.

Rhythm The pattern or flow of sound created by stressed and unstressed syllables. Unlike meter, which is a mechanical measurement of such pattern, rhythm generally expresses a quality achieved by the pattern, so one may say that the rhythm is lighthearted or swaggering or effortful or numb. See p. 374.

Rich rhyme See p. 377.

Run-on line See **Enjambment.**

S

Scansion The measuring of verse into poetic feet, or a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. See Appendix A, p. 373.

Scene and **summary** Methods of treating time in fiction. A summary covers a relatively long period of time in relatively short compass; a scene deals at length with a relatively short period of time. See p. 263.

Secondary stress Many poets see a secondary stress—less emphasis than a stress, more than an unstress—in the scanning of English poetry. Most three- and four-syllable words offer such a secondary stress: cáre-fŭl-ĺý, ĭn-śi-dĭ-ŏus. The secondary stress is marked with a double accent mark. See p. 373.

Second person See **Person.**

Self-reflexivity Referring back to the self. Generally used to indicate that the work, rather than pretending to represent a true picture of real events, acknowledges in some way that it is a fiction, an artifact, a work of imagination. See p. 321.

Septet A group or verse of seven lines. See p. 380.

Sestet A group or verse of six lines, especially the last six lines of a Petrarchan sonnet. See p. 380.

Setting The place and period in which a story or drama takes place. See Chapter 5.

Short-short story A plotted fiction of no more than 500 words, usually fewer. Also sometimes called *flash fiction* or *microfiction* See p. 168.

Short vowels See **Vowel.**

Simile A comparison using the terms *like* or *as*. See **Metaphor.**

Slant rhyme See **Off rhyme.**

Soliloquy A theatrical convention in which a character alone onstage makes a speech that we understand to represent his or her thoughts. See p. 339.

Sonnet A poem of fourteen lines. See p. 380.

Song May refer to any poetry or verse, but most often to a lyric or a verse meant to be set to music.

Spondee A subsitute foot consisting of two accented (stressed) syllables. See p. 376.

Stage lie A theatrical convention in which the character says one thing but betrays the opposite through contradiction or visible behavior. See p. 334.

Stanza A group of lines within a poem, usually set off by white space on the page, typically having the same number of lines in the same rhythm and rhyme pattern. See **Strophe.**

Story A sequence of fictional or remembered events, usually involving a conflict, crisis, and resolution. Humphry House, in his commentaries on Aristotle, defines story as everything the reader needs to know to make coherent sense of the plot, and plot as the particular portion of the story the author chooses to present—the "present tense" of the narrative. See Chapters 6 and 9.

Strategy In drama, the method that a character uses to get what he or she wants in any given beat of dialogue. For example, flattery, sympathy, a guilt trip, kindness, anger, and so forth. The goal may be worthy or unworthy. The strategy will change with each beat.

Stress See **Accent.** See pp. 304 and 373–374.

Strophe The word derives from the choral ode of Greek drama but has come to mean a group of lines within a poem, the groupings usually irregular or unrhymed. Some poets and critics use this meaning to differentiate a *strophe* from a *stanza*, reserving the latter term for a group of regular, rhymed divisions. See **Stanza.**

Summary See **Scene.**

Summarized dialogue See **Dialogue.**

Syllable A unit of spoken language that is a single uninterrupted sound. A syllable will always contain a vowel; it may contain one or more consonants. So *I* and *Oh* are each a single syllable, but so are *light* and *sow* and *soap*. The word LIGHT-ning thus contains two syllables, of which the first is accented or stressed and the second unaccented or unstressed. The syllable is crucial to English poetry because it is the pattern of accented and unaccented syllables that form the basis of the rhythm. See p. 373.

Syllabic verse Poetry in which line length is fixed by the number of syllables in the line; the number of accents is irrelevant. Some poetic forms are intrinsically syllabic, such as the haiku, which consists of three lines in the pattern of five, seven, and five syllables. See p. 375.

Symbol Something, usually an object, that stands for something larger, often an interrelated complex of ideas, values, and beliefs. For example, the flag stands for love of country. In literature, this object is particular to the work. The golden bowl in Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* stands for a situation involving deception, self-deception, betrayal, and flawed marital love. See p. 144.

Synecdoche A figure of speech in which a part stands for the whole, as in *all hands on deck* or *I'm going to get some new wheels.* See p. 24.

Syntax The arrangement of words within a sentence. See p. 48.

T

Tempo The pace, speed, or slowness of a rhythm. See p. 374.

Tercet A three-line stanza. See p. 380.

Tetrameter A poetic line consisting of four feet. See **Poetic foot** and p. 370.

Theatricalism The dramatic convention by which the actors acknowledge that the stage is a stage, the play a play, and themselves players of parts. See p. 332.

Third person See **Person.**

Trimeter A poetic line consisting of three feet. See **Poetic foot** and p. 377.

Triplet A tercet (three-line stanza) of poetry in which all the end words rhyme. See p. 380.

Trochee (n.), **trochaic** (adj.) Poetic foot consisting of one accented or stressed and one unaccented or unstressed syllable, as in TI-ger. See **Poetic foot** and p. 376.

Trope See **Figure of speech.**

True rhyme See pp. 304 and 377.

U

Unaccented or **unstressed** A syllable that receives relatively little emphasis. See **Accent.**

Unstress See **Unaccented.**

V

Villanelle An intricate poem in which the first and third lines are repeated at the end of alternating successive verses and as a couplet at the end. See pp. 211 and 321.

Vocabulary The sum total of words known and used by a writer (or a person or group of people); the choice of words in a particular work. See p. 48.

Voice The recognizable style of a particular writer or character, composed of syntax, vocabulary, attitude, and tone. See Chapter 3.

Voiceover In film and theater, the voice of an unseen character providing narration, usually by mechanical means. See p. 339.

Vowel The speech sound created by a relatively free passage of breath through the larynx and oral cavity, in English represented by the sounds of *a, e, i, o, u,* and sometimes y. Vowels may be either *long,* as pronounced in the words *main, feet, dine, rope,* and *cute*; or *short,* as in *cat, pet, in, hop,* and *up*. The designations *long* and *short* hark back to Greek and Latin verse, which was counted not in accented and unaccented syllables but by the length of time it took to pronounce a given syllable. See p. 373.

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index

A
Abstractions, 18
Academic research essays, 229
Accidental Tourist (Tyler), 21
Action
  character as, 102–104
  in drama, 332–336
  poetic, 313–315
  presentation of character through, 95
  setting as, 146–148
Active verbs, 19, 311
"A Lecture on the Elegy" (Stafford), 306
Alexie, Sherman, "At Navajo Monument Valley Tribal School," 154–155, 314
Alliteration, 303, 378
"American history looks for light - a prayer for the survival of Barack Obama" (Bonair-Agard), 39–41
American Idol, 335
Anaphora, 317
"Anatomy of Disorder" (Seyburn), 214–218
Angela's Ashes (McCourt), 54
Antagonist, 168
Anzaldúa, Gloria, "sus plumas el viento," 97
Appleman, Philip, "Nobody Dies in the Spring," 156–157, 314
Aristotle, 2, 96, 105, 168, 260
Artaud, Antonin, 332
The Art of Fiction (Gardner), 21, 60
Aspects of the Novel (Forster), 260
Assonance, 303, 378
Atmosphere, 144
"At Navajo Monument Valley Tribal School" (Alexie), 154–155, 314
"At the Dam" (Didion), 148–150
Atwood,Margaret
  Cat's Eye, 19
  Lady Oracle, 264–265
  "The Female Body," 245–247
Auden, W.H., 298, 375, 380
August in My Father's House (Ignatieff), 143
Auster, Paul, *Man in the Dark*, 147
Authorial interpretation, 106
Authorial intrusion, 233
Authors
  character as presented by, 106
  voice of, 48–50
Automatic writing, 7

B
Backstory, 266–268
The Bald Soprano (Ionesco), 108
Ballad meter, 380
Baraka, Imamu Amiri, *Dutchman*, 144
Barry, Dave, 51–52
Bartheleme, Donald, "The School," 150–152
Bausch, Richard, "Tandolfo the Great," 118–127
Baxter, Charles, *First Light*, 199
Beat, 340
"Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self" (Walker), 62–68
Beckett, Samuel, *Happy Days*, 332
"Beirut" (Freeman), 155–156
Belieu, Eric, "Love Is Not an Emergency," 323–324
Bellow, Saul
  "Memoir of a Bootlegger's Son," 146
  Seize the Day, 107
Bennett, Alan, *A Cream Cracker Under the Settee*, 53
Berry, Wendell, "In Distrust of Movements," 232
"Bigfoot Stole My Wife" (Carlson), 290–293
Bishop, Elizabeth, "One Art," 211–213, 314
Black Swan Green (Mitchell), 101
Blackwood, Scott, "One of Us Is Hidden Away," 181–186
Blank verse, 379
Bloom, Amy, "The Story," 270–279
Bly, Carol, *The Passionate, Accurate Story*, 56
Bonair-Agard, Roger, "American history looks for light - a prayer for the survival of Barack Obama," 39–41
"The Book of My Life" (Hemon), 109–111

"The Book of Sand" (Borges), 82–85
Borges, Jorge Luis, "The Book of Sand," 82–85
Bowe, Warren J., "Guns for Teachers," 68
Brainstorming, 7
Brontë,Charlotte, *Shirley*, 58
Browning, Robert, 53
"Bullet in the Brain" (Wolff), 34–38
Burroway, Janet, "Indian Dancer," 218–224
Busch, Frederick, "For the Love of a Princess of Mars," 231
Butler, Robert Olen, 17, 96
Butler, Samuel, *Erewhon*, 136
Butley (Gray), 333
Byatt, A. S., "Crocodile Tears," 106

C
Cacophony, 378
Caesura, 306
The Caine Mutiny (Woulk), 107
Camera, setting as, 141–144
Campbell, Molly, "Telephone Bob," 131–134
Carlson, Ron, 139, 141, 142, 201
"Bigfoot Stole My Wife," 290–293
Carter, Angela "The Werewolf," 153–154
The Catcher in the Rye (Salinger), 54
Central narrator, 56
Chabon, Michael, 5
"Ragnarok Boy," 226, 251–255
The Yiddish Policemen's Union, 52
Character
as action, 95, 102–104
as conflict, 107
in creative nonfiction, 230–231
as desire, 96–97
direct presentation of, 95
in drama, 334–335
dynamic, 167
flat, 108
as image, 95, 97–99
indirect presentation of, 95
as presented by author, 106
setting and, 146–147
stock, 108
as thought, 95, 104–106
as voice, 53–55, 95, 99–102
Chekhov, Anton, "The Proposal," 340, 341–352
Chronotope, 140
Ciardi, John, 12
Cinderella, 172–174, 262
Cisneros, Sandra, 144
"Salvador Late or Early," 143
Cliché, 27, 308–309
Climax, 174
Closely Observed Trains (Hrabal), 56
Close-up shot, 143
Cloud Atlas (Mitchell), 137–138
Collins, Billy, "Snow Day," 41–42
"Columbia the Gem" (Stern), 318
"Columbine High School/Littleton, CO" (Goldbarth), 188
Comic books, 5
"Coming from the Country" (Sanders), 51
Complications, 170
Conceit, 308–309
Concrete details, 20–23
Conflict
character as, 107
connection and disconnection and, 171–175
in story structure, 168–171
Conflict-crisis-resolution model, 168–170
Connection, 171–175
Connotation, 307–308
Connotative meanings, 19
Consonance, 303, 304, 378
Consonant clusters, 304, 378
Consonants, 304, 373
Couplet, 379
Cosmic irony, 52
Costumes, 332–336
A Cream Cracker Under the Settee (Bennett), 53
Creative nonfiction
character in, 230–231
essays and, 226–228
fact and truth in, 234–236
format, 255–258
general examples of, 237–258
image and voice in, 229–230
interpretation in, 231–232
research as aspect of, 232–233
scene in, 229–230
setting in, 231
techniques of, 229–233
territory of, 3
transitions and focus in, 233–234
Creative nonfiction readings
as character examples, 109–118
as imagery examples, 28
as setting examples, 148–150
as story examples, 176–179
as voice examples, 62–68
Crisis, 168
Crisis action, 170
"Crocodile Tears" (Byatt), 106
The Crucible, (Miller), 17

D
Dactyl, 376
Dactylic meters, 376
D'Aguilar, Fred, "A Son in Shadow," 235–236
Daniel, John M., "Frontiers," 168, 172, 187
Daughter's Keeper (Waldman), 98
Dead metaphors, 309–310
Death of a Salesman (Miller), 332
Decision, 103
DeLillo, Don, *Underworld*, 144–145
Denotation, 307–308
Denotative meanings, 19
Denouement, 170
Density, 310–311
Description, 138
Desire
  character as, 96–97
  thought and, 105
Details
  concrete and significant, 20–23
  explanation of, 20
  metaphor and, 26
  in poetry, 311
Development. *See also* Revision
  of drafts, 197–198
  function of, 196
  outlining for, 199
  quilting for, 200–201
  research as aspect of, 202
Dewberry, Elizabeth, 206
Dialogue
  in creative nonfiction, 230
  direct, 101
  in drama, 335–339
  indirect, 101
  in memoirs, 175
  mood and, 146
  role of, 100–101
  summarized, 101
  theatrical, 336–339
  thought and, 105
Dickinson, Emily, 301, 308
Diction, 48
Didion, Joan
  "At the Dam," 148–150
  "Why I Write," 48
Diegetic sound, 335
Dillard, Annie
  "Heaven and Earth in Jest," 28–29
  Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, 28
  The Writing Life, 204
DiPietro, Joe, "Executive Dance," 363–366
Direct dialogue, 101
Disconnection, 171–175
Discovery, 103
Doctorow, E. L., 236
  Ragtime, 235
"Do He Have Your Number, Mr. Jeffrey?" (Pemberton), 237–244
Donne, John, 309
Doty, Mark, 47
Doubleness, 312–313
Drabble, Margaret, 198
  The Ice Age, 57
Drafts
  developing, 197–198
  revision of, 203–207
Drama
  characters in, 105
  dialogue in, 335–339
  fiction vs., 329–331
  format, 367–372
  as genre, 5
  revealing thought in, 339
  sight in
  sound in, 335–339
  structure, 339–340
  ten-minute, 340–341
  theatrical dialogue, 336–339
Drama readings
  as character examples, 131–134
  general examples of, 341–366
  as imagery examples, 44–45
  as setting examples, 158–165
  as voice examples, 89–93
Dramatic irony, 52, 336
Dufresne, John, 144
  "Nothing to Eat but Food: Menu as Memoir," 142
Dunne, William, "Good Morning, Romeo", 356–362
Dutchman (Baraka), 144

E
Editing, 207–208
  symbols used for, 383
Ehrlich, Gretel, 266
Einstein, Albert, 140
The Elements of Style (Strunk), 206
Emotion, 145–146
End rhymes, 378
End-stopped line, 306
Engle, Paul, 196
Enjambment, 306
"Epithalamion," 312
"Epithalamium" (Laird), 325–326
Erewhon (Butler), 136
Essays, 5
Establishing shot, 141
"Eukiah" (Wilson), 190–193
Euphony, 378
"Everyday Use" (Walker), 147

"Executive Dance" (DiPietro), 363–366
Experience, 2
Exposition, 170, 330

F
"Facing It" (Komunyakaa), 43
Falling action, 170
"Falling in Love Again" (Galloway), 231
Far Side of the Moon (Lepage), 332
"Fathers" (Paley), 314, 322
"Feared Drowned" (Olds), 57
"The Female Body" (Atwood), 245–247
Fiction
  characters in, 105
  drama vs., 329–331
  format, 294–296
  scene and summary in, 263–266
  story and plot in, 260–263
  text and subtext in, 268–270
Fiction genre, 5
Fiction readings
  as character examples, 118–127
  examples of, 270–293
  as imagery examples, 34–39
  as setting examples, 150–154
  as story examples, 179–181
  as voice examples, 69–85
Figures of speech, 24–27
"Fire and Ice" (Frost), 26
First Light (Baxter), 199
First person, 56
Flashback, 266–268
Flat characters, 108
Fleming, Ian, 54
Focus, 233–234
Focused freewriting, 7
Ford, Richard, *Independence Day*, 137
Formal verse, 298–302, 305–306
Format
  creative nonfiction, 255–258
  drama, 367–372
  fiction, 294–296
  poetry, 326–327
Forster, E. M., 199
  Aspects of the Novel, 260–261
"For the Love of a Princess of Mars" (Busch), 231
Fourth-wall realism, 332
Fowler, Henry W., *Modern English Usage*, 310
Frankl, Victor, 107
Freeman, John, "Beirut," 155–156
Free verse, 298–302, 305–306, 374
Freewriting, 7
French, Elizabeth Kemper, "This Is How I Remember It," 170, 172, 187
"French Fries" (Martin), 44–45
"Frontiers" (Daniel), 168, 172, 187
Frost, Robert, 301
  "Fire and Ice," 26
  "Mending Wall," 379
Fugard, Athol, "'Master Harold.'.. and the Boys," 98

G
Galloway, Terry, "Falling in Love Again," 231
Gardner, John, 102, 167
  The Art of Fiction, 21, 60
"Gas" (Rivera), 353–356
Generalizations, 18
Genre fiction, 5
Genre, meanings of, 5–6
Gibbons, Reginald, "We Say," 303
Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 295–296
Ginsberg, Allen, 301
"Girl" (Kincaid), 38–39
The Glass Menagerie (Williams), 60
"God Says Yes to Me" (Haught), 130
Goldbarth, Albert, "Columbine High School/Littleton, CO," 188
Gombrowicz, Witold, "Ivona, Princess of Burgundia," 22
"Good Morning, America" (Sandburg), 141
"Good Morning, Romeo' (Dunne), 356–362
Gordimer, Nadine, *July's People*, 267
"The Grad Student Rap" (Ruben), 88–89
Gray, Simon, *Butley*, 333
"Guns for Teachers" (Bowe), 68
Gutkind, Lee, 226

H
Habit, 7–8
Haiku, 301, 381
Half rhyme, 378
Hall, Donald, 310
Hamby, Barbara, "Ode to American English," 86–87
Hamlet (Shakespeare), 54, 96
"The Hammock" (Lee), 189–190
Hampl, Patricia, "Red Sky in the Morning," 174, 176–179
Happy Days (Beckett), 332
Hass, Robert, 305
  "Images," 230
  "A Story About the Body," 187

Haught, Kaylin, "God Says Yes to Me," 130
"Heaven and Earth in Jest" (Dillard), 28–29
Hemingway, Ernest, 140
  "Hills Like White Elephants," 59
  A Moveable Feast, 144
  "A Very Short Story," 279–280
Hemon, Aleksandar, "The Book of My Life," 109–111
"Her Kind" (Sexton), 51
Heroic couplet, 379
"High Hard Ones" (O'Connor), 89–93
"Hills Like White Elephants" (Hemingway), 59
"Him, His Place" (Rector), 304
The History of Love (Krauss), 98, 108
Hoagland, Edward, 234
Hoagland, Tony, "There Is No Word," 320–321
Hoeg, Peter, *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, 26
"Hoop Sex" (Weesner), 229–230
Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 301
House, Humphry, 260
Housman, A. E., 105, 141, 144
  "II" from *A Shropshire Lad*, 104
"How to Be A Writer" (Moore), 57–58
Hrabal, Bohumil, *Closely Observed Trains*, 56
Hughes, Ted, 4
Hughes, Ted, "Thistles," 308
Hyperbole, 24

I
Iambic, 374, 375, 379, 380
The Ice Age (Drabble), 57
Idioms, 309–310
Ignatieff, Michael, *August in My Father's House*, 143
"II" from *A Shropshire Lad* (Housman), 104
"I Knew a Woman" (Roethke), 127–128
Image
  character as, 97–99
  in creative nonfiction, 229–230
  details and, 20–24
  figures of speech and, 24–27
  imagination and, 16–20
  in poetry, 307–310
  presentation of character through, 95
  senses and, 17
"Images" (Hass), 230
Imagination, 16–20
Imaginative writing
  forms of, 175
  foundation of, 17
  sources of, 196
"Incarnations of Burned Children" (Wallace), 179–181, 266
Inciting incident, 330
Independence Day (Ford), 137
"Indian Dancer" (Burroway), 218–224
Indirect dialogue, 101
Indirect method, 106
"In Distrust of Movements" (Berry), 232
Intensity, 310–311
Internal rhyme, 304, 378
Interpreting, 95
Interstitial fiction, 5
Ionesco, Eugene, *The Bald Soprano:*, 108
Irony, 52–53
Ives, David, "The Philadelphia," 158–164
"Ivona, Princess of Burgundia" (Gombrowicz), 22

J
Jennings, Elizabeth, "One Flesh," 129
John 11:25, 54
Johnson, Claudia, 171, 172
Jonson, Ben,"Still to be Neat," 327
Journals
  excerpts from, 8–12
  function of, 6–7
  suggestions for, 7–8
Journey, story as, 167–168
Joyce, James, *Ulysses*, 235
Judgments, 18, 22
July's People (Gordimer), 267

K
Karr, Mary, *The Liars Club*, 16
Keats, John, 307
Kincaid, Jamaica, "Girl," 38–39
King Lear (Shakespeare), 54
Kingsolver, Barbara, *Poisonwood Bible*, 269
Kirby, David, 312
Kizer, Caroline, 313–314
Komunyakaa, Yusef
  "Facing It," 43
  "Nude Interrogation," 157
Kowit, Steve, "The Grammar Lesson," 320
Krauss, Nicole, *The History of Love*, 98, 108
Kumin, Maxine, 314–315
Kumin, Maxine, "Woodchucks," 188–189

L
Lady Lazarus (Plath), 54
Lady Oracle (Atwood), 264–265
Laird, Nick, "Epithalamium," 325–326
Larkin, Philip, "Toads," 304
Lee, Li-Young, "The Hammock," 189–190
Le Guin, Ursula K., "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," 280–285
Lepage, Robert, *Far Side of the Moon*, 332
Lethem, Jonathan, 5
Levertov, Denise, 305
The Liars Club (Karr), 16
Limited omniscient narrator, 58
Line, 305–307
  end-stopped, 374
  in poetry, 373
  run-on, 374
Line editing, 383–384
Linking verbs, 19
Literary nonfiction, 226
Literature, forms of, 5
Logan, William, 96
The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (Sillitoe), 57
Long shot, 141, 142, 143
Long vowels, 304
"Love Is Not an Emergency" (Belieu), 323–324
Lyric, 380

M
Mackall, Joe, 234
Mairs, Nancy, 229
Maisel, Eric, 316
Making Shapely Fiction (Stern), 264
Man in the Dark (Auster), 147
"Margot's Diary" (Wisenberg), 226, 247–250
Martin, Jane, "French Fries," 44–45
"Master Harold.'...and the Boys" (Fugard), 98
McCourt, Frank, *Angela's Ashes*, 54
McEwen, Todd, "A Very Young Dancer," 25
McInnis, Susan, 139
McNeel, John, 144
  "On the Fedala Road," 142
Melville, Herman, *Moby Dick*, 54
"Memoir of a Bootlegger's Son" (Bellow), 146
Memoirs, 104, 175, 227–228
"Mending Wall" (Frost), 379
Metaphor
  danger of, 27
  defined, 24
  details and, 25–26
  explanation of, 25
  in poetry, 308–309
  use of, 25–26
Meter, 374
  ballad, 380
Metered verse, 374
Metonymy, 24
"Me vs. Animals" (Percy), 112–118
Middle shot, 141, 143
Miller, Arthur
  The Crucible, 17, 18
Miller, Arthur, *Death of a Salesman*, 332
Milton, John, *Paradise Lost*, 306, 379
Mitchell, David, *Black Swan Green*, 101
Mitchell, David, *Cloud Atlas*, 137–138
Mnemonic devices, 299
Moby Dick (Melville), 54
Modern English Usage (Fowler), 310
"A Modest Proposal" (Swift), 53
Mood, 144
Moore, Lorrie, "How to Be A Writer," 57–58
Motion poetry, 5
A Moveable Feast (Hemingway), 144

N
Narrators
  central, 56
  limited omniscient, 58
  objective, 58
  omniscient, 58
  peripheral, 56
Near rhyme, 378
"Nirvana" (Tate), 303
"Nobody Dies in the Spring" (Appleman), 156–157, 314
Nondiegetic sound, 336
Nonverbal sounds, 335–339
"Nothing to Eat but Food: Menu as Memoir" (Dufresne), 142
"Nude Interrogation" (Komunyakaa), 157, 187

O
Objective narrator, 58
Observation, 7
Obstacles, 340
O'Connor, Chuck, "High Hard Ones," 89–93
O'Connor, Flannery, 97

Octave, 380
Octet, 380
"Ode to American English" (Hamby), 86–87
Off-rhyme, 378
Olds, Sharon
"Feared Drowned," 57
"The Language of the Brag," 324–325
"The One Girl at the Boys Party," 312–313
Oles, Carole Simmons, "Stonecarver," 128–129
Omniscient narrator, 58
"One Art" (Bishop), 211–213, 314
"One Flesh" (Jennings), 129
"One of Us Is Hidden Away" (Blackwood), 181–186
"The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (Le Guin), 280–285
"The One Girl at the Boys Party" (Olds), 312–313
"On the Fedala Road" (McNeel), 142
Order, 171
Ostriker, Alicia, "Wrong About the Horse," 85–86
Our Country's Good (Wertenbaker), 57
Outlines, 199
Oxymoron, 24, 312
Ozymandias (Shelley), 54

P
Paley, Grace, "Fathers," 314, 322
Paradise Lost (Milton), 306, 379
Paradox, 312
Paris Review, 102
The Passionate, Accurate Story (Bly), 56
The Passion of Artemisia (Vreeland), 140
Passive verbs, 19
Patchett, Ann, *Run*, 59
Pearlman, Edith, "Self-Reliance," 285–290
Pemberton, Gayle, "Do He Have Your Number, Mr. Jeffrey?," 237–244
Percy, Benjamin, "Me vs. Animals," 112–118
Peripheral narrator, 56
Person
explanation of, 56
first, 56
second, 57
third, 58–60
Persona, 50–52
Personal essays, 104, 227–228. *See also* Creative nonfiction
Personification, 24
Phoneme, 373
Pilgrim at Tinker Creek (Dillard), 28
Pinsky, Robert, 299, 302
Plath, Sylvia
Lady Lazarus, 54
"Rhyme," 303
"Stillborn," 18
"Stillborn," 319
Play, 6, 12
Plot
arranging for, 261–262
story and, 260–263
Poetic feet, 300, 373, 374–377
Poetry
cliché in, 308–309
dead metaphors in, 309–310
defined, 298
denotation and connotation in, 307–308
density and intensity in, 310–311
doubleness in, 312–313
formal and free verse, 298–302
format, 326–327
idioms in, 309–310
imagery in, 307–310
line in, 305–307
means of measuring, 300
metaphor in, 308–309
motion poetry, 5
persona in, 105
rhyme in, 377–378
short short stories and, 5
sound in, 302–305
stanzas in, 379–382
stress and scansion in, 373
suggestions for finding, 315–317
Time in, 374
voice in, 311–312
Poetry readings
as character examples, 127–130
general examples of, 318–326
as imagery examples, 39–44
as setting examples, 154–158
as story examples, 187–190
as voice examples, 85–89
Point of attack, 330
Point of view
central narrator, 56
of character, 99
distance and, 60–61
first person, 56
peripheral narrator, 56
second person, 57
third person, 58–60
voice and, 55–61

Poisonwood Bible (Kingsolver), 269
Pope, Alexander, 304
Porter, Katherine Anne, *Ship of Fools*, 106
Potok, Chaim, 167
Pound, Ezra, 301
Power struggle, story as a, 168–171
"The Proposal" (Chekhov), 341–352
Props, 332–336
Prose poem, 5
Prose poems, 187
Prosody, 300, 373–374
Protagonist, 168
Puns, 24, 312
Pyrrhic foot, 376

Q
Quatrain, 380
Quilting method, 200–201

R
"Ragnarok Boy" (Chabon), 226, 251–255
Ragtime (Doctorow), 235
Reading, 3–4
Rector, Liam, "Him, His Place," 304
"Red Sky in the Morning" (Hampl), 174, 176–179
Research
  for creative nonfiction, 226, 228, 232–233
  for imaginative writing, 202
Resolution, 168, 170
Revealing thought, 339
Revision. *See also* Development
  editing as aspect of, 207–208
  examples of, 211–224
  function of, 196
  process of, 203–207
  workshops for, 208–211
Rhyme, 377–378
"Rhyme" (Plath), 303
Rhythm, 374
Rivera, José, "Gas," 353–356
Roethke, Theodore, "I Knew a Woman," 127–128, 314
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (Stoppard), 136
Roth, Philip, 55
Roughing It (Twain), 257–258
Ruben, Adam J.,"The Grad Student Rap," 88–89
Run (Patchett), 59

S
Sable, Josiah, 55
Salinger, J. D., *The Catcher in the Rye*, 54
"Salvador Late or Early" (Cisneros), 143
Sandburg, Carl, 144
  "Good Morning, America," 141
Sanders, Scott Russell, "Coming from the Country," 51
Saunders, George, "Victory Lap," 69–82
Scenes
  in creative nonfiction, 229–230
  in drama, 339–340
  in fiction, 263–266
Schoen, Steven, 137
Second person, 57
Sedaris, David, "Standing By," 29–34
Seize the Day (Bellow), 107
"Self-Reliance" (Pearlman), 285–290
Senses, 17, 18
Sets, 332–336
Setting
  as action, 146–148
  as camera, 141–144
  in creative nonfiction, 231
  in drama, 334–335
  as mood and symbol, 144–146
  significance of, 136
  as world, 137–141
Settle, Mary Lee, 202
Sexton, Anne
  "Her Kind," 51
  "Young," 50–51
Seyburn, Patty, "Anatomy of Disorder," 214–218
Shakespeare, William, 26, 96, 306, 379, 381
  Hamlet, 54, 96
  King Lear, 54
Shange, Ntozake, "spell #7," 99
Shelley, Percy Bysshe, *Ozymandias*, 54
Ship of Fools (Porter), 106
Shirley (Brontë), 58
Short short stories, 5
Short-short story, 168, 170
Significant details, 20–23
Sillitoe, Alan, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, 57
Simile, 24, 25–26
Slipstream fiction, 5
Smiley, Sam, 103
Smilla's Sense of Snow (Hoeg), 26
Smith, Charlie, 298
"Snow Day" (Collins), 41–42
"A Son in Shadow" (D'Aguilar), 235–236
Sonnet, 380
Sound
  in drama, 335–339
  in poetry, 302–305

Space-time continuum, 140
Speech, 100
"spell #7" (Shange), 99
Spondees, 304
Stafford, William, "A Lecture on the Elegy," 306
Stage lie, 334
Stage settings, 138–139
"Standing By" (Sedaris), 29–34
Stanzas, 379–382
Stein, Gertrude, 7
Stern, Gerald
"Columbia the Gem," 318
"Sundays," 227
What I Can't Bear Losing, 227
Stern, Jerome, 144, 263, 308–309
Making Shapely Fiction, 264
"Stillborn" (Plath), 319
"Still to be Neat" (Jonson), 327
Stock characters, 108
"Stonecarver" (Oles), 128–129
Stoppard, Tom, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 136
Story
choosing where to begin, 262–263
as connection and disconnection, 171–175
defined, 260
as journey, 167–168
plot and, 260–263
as power struggle, 168–171
structure, 168–170
"A Story About the Body" (Hass), 187
"The Story" (Bloom), 270–279
Strategy, 340
Stressed syllables, 373, 374–377
Stresses, 304
Structure
drama, 339–340
outlines for, 199
quilting method, 200–201
story, 168–170
Strunk, William H., 20
The Elements of Style (Strunk), 206
Subtext, 268–270
Summarized dialogue, 101
Summary, 263–266
"Sundays" (Stern), 227
"sus plumas el viento" (Anzaldúa), 97
Swift, Jonathan, "A Modest Proposal," 53
Syllabic verse, 375
Symbol, setting as, 144
Synecdoche, 24
Syntax, 48

T
"Tandolfo the Great" (Bausch), 118–127
Tate, James, "Nirvana," 303
"Telephone Bob" (Campbell), 131–134
Tempo, 374
Ten-minute play, 340–341
Tercet, 380
Text, 268–270
Theatrical dialogue, 336–339
Theatricalism, 332
"The Grammar Lesson" (Kowit), 320
"The Language of the Brag" (Olds), 324–325
"The Philadelphia" (Ives), 158–164
"There Is No Word" (Hoagland), 320–321
"The School" (Bartheleme), 150–152
"The Werewolf" (Carter), 153–154
Third person, 58–60
"This Is How I Remember It" (French), 170, 172, 187
"Thistles" (Hughes), 308
Thought
character as, 104–105
desire and, 105
presentation of character through, 95
"Toads," (Larkin), 304
Transitions, 233–234
Trilling, Lionel, 52
Triplet, 380
Trochee, 376
Tropes, 24
True rhyme, 304, 377
Truth
in creative nonfiction, 234–236
in words, 2
Turning point, 174
Twain, Mark, 52
Roughing It, 257–258
Tyler, Anne
Accidental Tourist, 21

U
Ulysses (Joyce), 235
Underworld (DeLillo), 144–145

V
Verbal irony, 52
Verbal sounds, 335–339
Verbs
  active, 19, 311
  linking, 19
  passive, 19
Verse
  blank, 379
  free, 374
  metered, 374
  syllabic, 375
"A Very Short Story" (Hemingway), 279–280
"A Very Young Dancer" (McEwen), 25
"Victory Lap" (Saunders), 69–82
Villanelle, 211
Vocabulary, 48, 311
Voice. *See also* Dialogue
  authors, 48–50
  character as, 53–55, 99–102
  in creative nonfiction, 229–230
  irony and, 52–53
  persona and, 50–52
  poetic, 311–312
  point of view and, 55–61
  presentation of character through, 95
Vonnegut, Kurt, 209
Vreeland, Susan
  The Passion of Artemisia, 140
Vreeland, Susan, *The Passion of Artemisia*, 144

W
Waldman, Ayelet, *Daughter's Keeper*, 98
Walker, Alice
  "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self," 62–68
  "Everyday Use," 147
Wallace, David Foster, "Incarnations of Burned Children," 179–181, 266
Weesner, Theodore "Hoop Sex," 229–230
Welty, Eudora, 102, 199, 299
Wertenbaker,Timberlake, *Our Country's Good*, 57
"We Say" (Gibbons), 303
West, Nathanael, 140
What I Can't Bear Losing (Stern), 227
Whitehead, Jaan, 48
"Why I Write" (Didion), 48
Williams, Tennessee, *The Glass Menagerie*, 60
Wilson, Lanford, "Eukiah," 190–193
Wisenberg, S. L., "Margot's Diary," 226, 247–250
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 226
Wolfe, Tom, 104
Wolff, Tobias, "Bullet in the Brain," 34–38
"Woodchucks" (Kumin), 188–189
World, setting as, 137–141
Woulk, Herman, *The Caine Mutiny*, 107
The Writing Life (Dillard), 204
Writing workshops
  basic protocols for, 13
  critical function of, 13
  goals of, 12–13
"Wrong About the Horse" (Ostriker), 85–86

Y
The Yellow Wallpaper (Gilman), 295–296
The Yiddish Policemen's Union (Chabon), 52
"Young" (Sexton), 50–51

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